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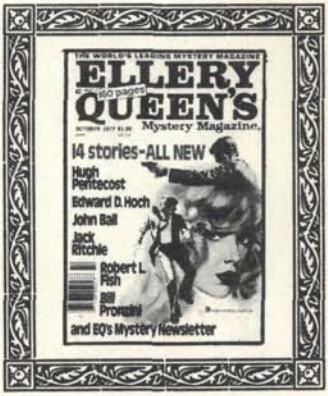

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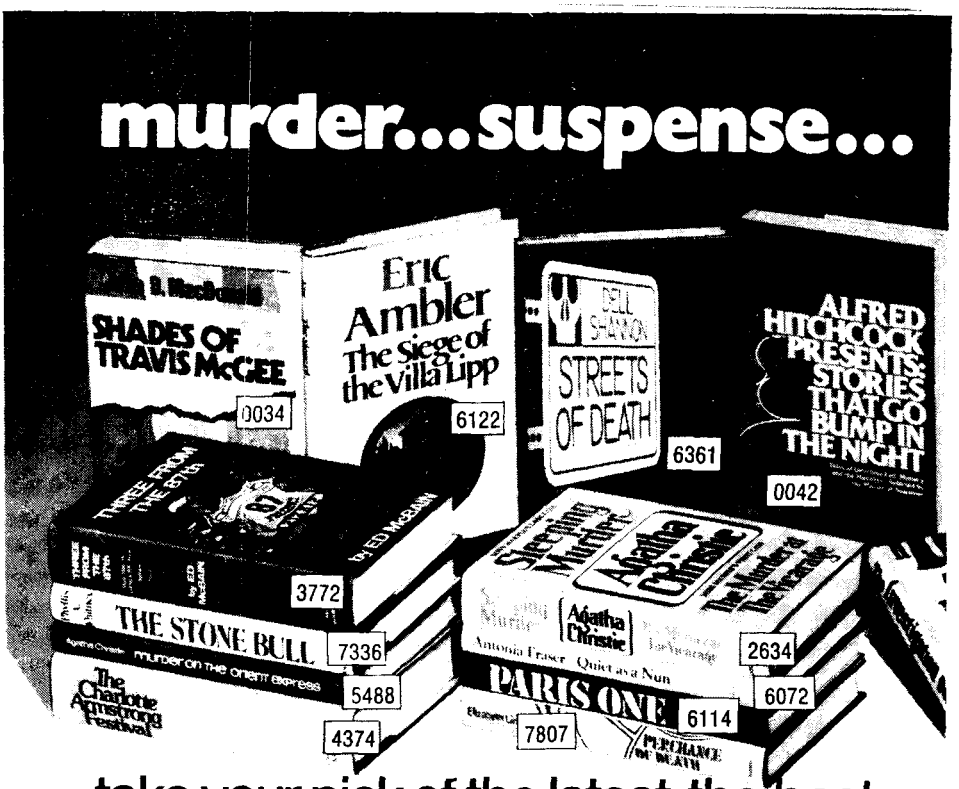

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A CASE OF INNOCENT EAVESDROPPING

by HELEN McCLOY

The girls of the Thursday Club were good bridge players. They never gossiped during play, only afterward.

"You're so brave, Maggie," said Heloise. "I don't see how you're going to put up with it."

"I don't either, but I must." Maggie Markel tried to look like Joan of Arc for a moment and failed. She was too plump and she put out too many erotic signals—plunging neckline, skin-tight jeans, hair rumpled to look as if she had just come from lovemaking.

"It's not as if there weren't homes for old people like her," said Doris.

"I know." Maggie's voice shook on the edge of righteous indignation. "But you see George has got this mother-fixation. He won't put his mother in a nursing home and he won't let her go on living alone after sixty-five, so I'm stuck with her."

"Anything we can do to help?"

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"Guess not, Doris, unless you want to come over someday and shove arsenic in her soup."

Everybody laughed.

So many of Mrs. Markel's contemporaries had died that no one called her "Jessie" any more. Even she was beginning to think of herself as "Mrs. Markel" or even "Ms. Markel" when she was feeling modern.

When the moving men took her furniture away to the auctioneer's, her apartment looked as bare as it had when she first moved in after her husband's death.

"You do understand," George had said then. "Maggie and I would love to have you live with us, but—"

"Of course I understand. Your father's mother spent a whole summer with us the year you were born. Every time I put booties on your feet, she yanked them off."

But George changed when his mother had her first heart attack.

"You might die there all alone, Mom, before you could get to a telephone. You'll have to come and live with us now."

"Couldn't I share an apartment with someone else?"

"Who?"

"Aren't there nursing homes?"

"A foretaste of hell that costs the earth."

The Thursday Club did not meet again until after Christmas. Maggie was the first to reach Heloise's house.

"You're looking perky," said Heloise. "Mother-in-law die and leave you a million?"

"No, but I've solved my problem."

"Arsenic or strychnine?"

"Neither."

"You don't mean to say you're getting along with her?"

"Like a house afire." Maggie lit a cigarette and smiled through the drift of smoke.

"What did you do?"

"Put her to work. How glad I am I took that course in applied psychology. You see, work is therapy. I wasn't fair to her when she first came. I treated her like a guest and that deprived her of a sense of belonging to the family. You won't believe this, but she used to waste a lot of time reading. Why, I can't imagine. We've

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got television, as I kept pointing out to her."

"And she doesn't read now?"

"She hasn't time. I've got her scrubbing all the pots and pans that can't go into the dishwasher, running the vacuum cleaner, and polishing the silver. She even minds Greg when he gets home from kindergarten so I can go out. She sits up with him whenever George and I have an evening on the town. It's a symbiotic exchange."

"And a lot cheaper than hiring a maid."

"Of course. If I had a maid I'd have to pay her two-fifty a month at least."

"But don't you have to pay for Mrs. Markel's food?"

"No way! Her income is just a trickle—savings account and social security—but it's still an income, around three-fifty a month. I make her endorse all checks to me and I deposit them in my account. Then I let her have fifty a month, ten a week for little things and an extra ten for emergencies."

"So she's paying you three hundred a month."

"She'd have to pay a lot more in a nursing home and she wouldn't get the love and companionship she gets from me."

"How generous."

"Don't you think I am? She does. She's pathetically grateful. Even if I could afford a maid, I wouldn't get one now because she needs this work to recover her identity."

"Who does?" demanded Doris from the doorway.

"Her mother-in-law. You've got to hear this, but you won't believe it."

"Oh, yes, I will. I live next door to them."

Mrs. Markel went to bed early these days. She was too tired to do anything else in the evening now. Sometimes she even dozed off in her chair after dinner. Perhaps it was just as well because she was not happy in the room allotted to her.

Someone else had taken her apartment now, so she could never go back to it; but she still remembered her view from the tenth floor—roofs and sky and all the creatures of the upper air, a flock of starlings darting past her windows or a jet from Logan a few thousand feet up still laboring to climb.

Here, when she looked out of her one ground-floor window, she was looking straight across a narrow strip of grass into the window of the house next door. She could see a bed pulled up close to

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that window and a woman, even older than herself, lying on the bed with two angry eyes glaring back at her.

"It's Miss Joralemon," Maggie had explained the first time. "If you don't like being watched, keep your blind down."

"But that would be like having no window at all."

"Oh, you can raise it at night. A professional homemaker takes care of her, gives her a sleeping pill after supper, and draws a curtain across her window so she sleeps right through the night."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Arthritis. Very bad. She's paralyzed. Lucky you don't have anything like that."

It hardly seemed the moment for Mrs. Markel to mention that the arthritis in her right hip had begun to trouble her again.

"Look at those hands," went on Maggie. "Warped and overlapping like pretzels. Her left hand is the worse and that's too bad because she's left-handed. Something nasty about lefties. They're bad luck to themselves and others. I don't trust them."

Mrs. Markel had learned to avoid arguments with Maggie, so she did not protest. She did remember that "sinister" comes from a Latin word meaning both left-handed and unlucky and that Buddhists call the path of evil the "left-hand path." Once again she realized that prejudice is a kind of frozen cruelty.

The neighbors on the other side were quite different. Frank Leslie was a stockbroker with a future that Maggie described as "brilliant." His wife, Doris, had money of her own which showed in their neat hedges and lavish flowerbeds. Theirs was a corner house with a broad sweep of lawn on this side.

They came over for dinner and bridge several times a month and always tried to include Mrs. Markel in the conversation, but she could see it was an effort. She liked Doris, a placid, natural blonde, but she didn't feel quite at home with Frank. There was a little too much flashing of black eyes and white teeth.

Her happiest moments were with Greg, her five-year-old grandson. He had a throaty little chuckle all his own, the joy of life made audible, but as the days went on he seemed to laugh less often. Was it her imagination or was it fact that he rarely laughed when he was with his mother? It was plain he loved her, yet sometimes he was anxious in her presence as if he were afraid of losing her.

When school came to an end Greg was switched to a day camp, really an outdoor kindergarten which met only in the morning.

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As soon as Maggie discovered that Mrs. Markel was always there when the boy got home at noon, Maggie herself was there less often. Mrs. Markel did not mind this at all.

If the day was fair she and the boy went outdoors on the side of the house away from Miss Joralemon where there was more space and a sandbox had been installed. That was how Mrs. Markel got to know her neighbor on this side, Doris Leslie.

She could not help noticing a trace of hostility in most of the things Doris said about Maggie. *If I had a little boy I'd always be here myself when he got back from day camp . . . I wish she wouldn't wear such tight jeans. She's not exactly a teenager.*

Mrs. Markel had a great distaste for what she called cattiness and Maggie herself called bitchiness. She had to exercise a good bit of tact and ingenuity to turn the conversation away from Maggie whenever she was with Doris.

When July came, Mrs. Markel and Greg sat in the kitchen where it was cooler than outdoors.

"We were going to put in air conditioning this year," said Maggie. "But prices went up and George's paycheck didn't."

One sultry afternoon when Greg was painting a portrait of Mrs. Markel in water colors and she was shelling peas, Maggie burst into the kitchen, her arms full of groceries.

"Have you forgotten? This is the night the Leslies are coming to dinner and I'm going to make one of my Penang curries. You'll have to clear all this stuff away and pitch in."

So the peas went into the refrigerator and the water colors were put away in Greg's bedroom and he and Mrs. Markel were set to chopping condiments.

Mrs. Markel had learned to dread the days when Maggie made her one party dish. The condiments alone took hours. There were little green onions, hardboiled eggs, dried herring, green peppers, and cashew nuts to chop; pineapple, coconut, and orange peel to grate; bacon to mince and raisins to seed if no seedless raisins were available. Thank God she didn't make her own chutney. It came out of a bottle at a caviar price.

And that was only the beginning. Into the curry itself went shrimp, tomatoes, celery, carrots, apples, more onions, more peppers, butter, and fifteen seasonings ranging from common herbs and white wine to cayenne pepper and imported curry powder.

When the mess was finally simmering in a huge kettle and the dining table was set with a dozen little condiment dishes for each

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person, every pot and pan in the kitchen had been used and they were all stacked in the kitchen sink waiting for Mrs. Markel to take over; but she couldn't do so just then because Greg must be given supper and a bath and put to bed while Maggie was dressing for dinner.

Greg was not a bit sleepy even after Mrs. Markel told him one installment of his favorite bedtime serial featuring two little mice named Lightfoot and Snowfoot. He wouldn't let her go until she left him with a nightlight which she knew Maggie would disapprove of. As it was, Mrs. Markel barely had time to change her dress before dinner.

When she came into the living room Maggie was already there resplendent in a new dress, a shapeless floating smock and loose wide slacks of silk chiffon; the colors, bluish lavender over pinkish mauve, blended with her amethyst necklace.

"You're making an occasion of this," said Mrs. Markel.

"I'd like to live this way all the time," snapped Maggie. "But, of course, as things are . . . "

George was a little surprised when he came in late and tired from his office.

"Bridge night," said Maggie. "Did you forget?"

"I'm afraid I did." He forced a smile. "Hello, Mom, you're looking younger than I feel."

Mrs. Markel knew this was absurd, but she was grateful that he took the trouble to tell such a pretty lie. She looked at him as she often did, trying to convince herself that this independent, grownup man had once been a dreamy little boy like Greg, completely under her control.

He hardly had time to wash his hands before the Leslies crossed the lawn between the two houses and came up on the side porch to tap on a French window. Frank had brought champagne. Doris, sophisticated in black crêpe, with black pearls around her white throat, made Maggie look a little suburban, or so Mrs. Markel thought.

At the table they put her between the two men. Both worked hard to keep a conversation going but she slipped away as soon as dinner was over and shut the kitchen door so they wouldn't hear her scrubbing pots and pans.

By the time she got through she was so tired that she fell asleep the moment she got into bed, only to wake up again in the middle of the night.

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The room was stifling. She threw off her bedclothes and opened the door into the hall, hoping for cross-ventilation, but not a breath stirred. A glass of cold water from the kitchen might help. Then she could sit up and wait for George, who was at a meeting of the Town Zoning Board.

She slipped into a cotton kimono and went down the hall into the living room. It looked cool in the moonlight, but it felt just as hot as her own room. Perhaps if she went out on the porch for a minute . . .

Her bare feet were silent on the plushy carpet as she crossed the floor. One of the French windows was standing open. There were no outdoor lights, but she caught a murmur of voices.

She took a step nearer. Then she saw Maggie and Frank Leslie sitting close together on a swinging couch in shadow beyond the moonlight.

" . . . money," he was saying. "I can't get any more out of Doris, but isn't your mother-in-law's savings account a joint account with George? If it is and if he could get hold of her passbook, he can draw all the money he wants. He doesn't have to tell her."

"He'd say that was stealing. She didn't make it a joint account so he could draw on it while she was alive. She just made it that way so he could inherit it without waiting for probate. Besides, even if you or I could make him do that, how could we make him hand the money over to you?"

"I'm a broker. Remember? I'd promise to double it by a smart investment."

"He'd never take a chance on losing her money. That really would be stealing, or so he'd say."

"He seems to have a lot of weirdo hangups."

"It's the way she brought him up."

"Then what are you and I going to use for money? We can't take off for Costa Rica without some capital. How much longer do you think his mother will live with her heart condition?"

The world was still for a moment as if everything was listening.

Even Maggie's voice was hushed when she spoke. "The doctor won't fix a date. He says it could happen in a year or so."

"Oh, great. I suppose that means she'll hang on for years until she's like Miss Joralemon."

Maggie's voice rose, shattering the stillness. "I can't bear it. Why do doctors prolong old age? Wasn't there an English doctor a few years ago who wanted a law to forbid all hospitals to treat

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any patients over sixty-five? She wouldn't be alive now if—"

"Watch it, kid. That's called murder."

"It isn't really. It's mercy killing. Does she want to be like Miss Joralemon?"

Frank laughed. "How does that rhyme go? *Thou shalt not kill; but needst not strive officiously to keep alive . . .*"

"What's so funny?"

"Forget it, Maggie."

"Forget what?"

"This whole Costa Rica business, you, me, everything."

"Can't we go on as we are without Costa Rica?"

"You know we can't. Doris suspects already. So does your kid."

"Greg? He's only a baby."

"Oh, he doesn't know what's going on. He just knows there's something. Remember that day he nearly caught us? That mustn't happen again. It's Costa Rica or nothing, but I'm not going there broke and I'm not going to get myself hung up on a murder rap, so forget it."

"Oh, Frank . . . "

Mrs. Markel had never heard such desolation in a human voice, but Frank was unmoved.

"Listen, Maggie. Don't you go and do anything foolish on your own. I won't stand by you if you do. Understand?"

Maggie reached for him.

With clinical detachment Mrs. Markel saw them kiss and writhe in each other's arms. At last she saw the man's figure slip silent as a shadow across the moonlit lawn to his own house. She stepped back behind the dining-room door as Maggie crossed the living room and went down the hall to her own bedroom.

What a chance they had taken! Didn't they realize that George might come home at any moment? Or had they realized and decided to savor the risk? Was there always an element of mischief in adultery?

Mrs. Markel didn't sit up for George after all. Shock had exhausted her. Now sleep brought her fearful dreams. She was screaming at a policeman, "You must do something!"

He answered calmly, "Don't you know that you dreamed the whole thing?"

Dr. Basil Willing had first come to Boston after the death of his wife. He had wanted to be near his only daughter while she was

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going to college there. Now his daughter was married and living abroad, but he was still in Boston.

Some lectures he gave at Harvard on forensic psychiatry had led the Boston police to consult him about the Case of the Pleasant Assassin. Before long they were asking for his counsel on any crime with a psychiatric twist, but it happened that it was from a news story in the *Boston Globe* that he first learned about the arrest of George Markel for the murder of his wife, Maggie.

Mr. Markel's mother, Jessie Markel, who lived with the couple and their son, had slept late. When she woke around eleven, she had found a note from George on the kitchen table: *Maggie's asleep. I'm taking Greg to camp on my way to the office.*

Mr. and Mrs. Markel had separate rooms because Mr. Markel was an insomniac who liked to work on sketches and plans for his advertising agency in his own room when he could not sleep.

This morning the elder Mrs. Markel had tiptoed every time she passed the closed door of her daughter-in-law's room until noon. Then, a little worried, she eased the door open and saw at once that Maggie was dead.

The police told a *Globe* reporter that Maggie Markel was killed by a blow from a blunt instrument just behind the right ear some time between eight P.M. and midnight. There was no sign of a weapon and no sign of anyone breaking into the house.

George Markel had once taken an Army course in unarmed combat. He would know where and how to strike. He claimed he had spent the entire time from eight P.M. to midnight at a meeting of his Town Zoning Board and did not get home until one A.M., but the few witnesses who saw him at the meeting had noticed him only sporadically. Rumor said that an eyewitness in his own neighborhood, Miss Cordelia Joralemon, had seen George shortly after eight P.M. in his wife's bedroom and—

Basil's telephone rang. Captain Grogan of District One, alias Beacon Hill, wanted to know if Dr. Willing would be able to see Mrs. Markel and Miss Joralemon today. The suburban police wanted their reliability as witnesses evaluated by a psychiatrist. Mrs. Markel was so anxious to clear her son that she had offered to come into Boston to see Dr. Willing this afternoon . . .

He noticed that she had let her dark hair go gray, but she had kept a neat figure and had a firm voice. She looked at the expanse of roof and sky and river beyond Basil's twentieth-floor windows. "Nice to have a view."

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"You have one, too?"

"I used to. It was a smaller apartment than this, on the tenth floor of an old building, but there was a view and I miss it now . . . Dr. Willing, Miss Joralemon is lying."

"What makes you think so?"

"She's unstable. We knew she was watching us all day from her bedside window. Now the police have discovered that she watched us most of the night as well. She never swallowed the sleeping pills she was supposed to take. She made a tiny hole in the curtain her homemaker drew across the window at night. We never suspected anything like that. On hot summer nights we left our windows open on that side and never pulled down our blinds."

"A compulsive voyeur?"

"Apparently. I suppose she was lonely. I would feel sorry for her if she wasn't now trying to get my son convicted of murder. She doesn't claim she saw him kill Maggie, but she does claim she saw him in Maggie's room during the time Maggie was killed."

"Had she any reason to hate your son?"

"I can't think of any. Couldn't it be unmotivated malice?"

"Or unconscious perjury," said Basil. "The act of seeing involves interpretation and that leaves room for self-deception. Eyewitnesses rarely invent, but they always edit whatever they see and whatever they remember. That's why science had to invent the experimental method."

"Can you prove self-deception?"

"Sometimes." Basil's eyes wandered to the golden dome of the State House just below his windows. "Could the distance between Miss Joralemon's window and your son's house possibly be as little as eight feet?"

"I have no idea, but the houses are close together on that side."

Basil rose. "Let's go out and measure it."

She picked up a small handbag with a smile. "I have plenty of quarters and dimes. I hoard them so I'll always have exact change for the MBTA."

"You won't need them this time. My car's in the basement garage."

They were on Storrow Drive before he spoke again. "I can't help your son unless you tell me everything. Did he have a motive?"

She hesitated only a moment, then told him about Maggie and Frank Leslie.

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"The Leslies say now they were at home together all yesterday evening, but I saw Frank with Maggie part of that time. He didn't leave until around eleven."

"So Doris Leslie is lying for his sake?"

"And for her own. She had the obvious motive for killing Maggie—jealousy—but Frank's motive is almost as plain. If he was cooling towards Maggie and she wasn't cooling towards him, he would be afraid that Maggie might tell Doris everything and ask her to divorce him. In that case he'd lose Doris *and* her money."

"Was Maggie capable of doing that?"

"She was capable of threatening to do it. I don't know if she would have done it or not."

The houses in the row were built in pairs, close together on one side, more separated on the other. Some contractor had saved money on excavation and plumbing that way, yet he could still advertise the places as one-family homes, each with an ample lot.

Basil measured the distance between the two houses, window to window. "A lot closer to eight feet than I would have believed possible."

"How did you know it would be close to eight feet?"

"I didn't know, Mrs. Markel. I just hoped."

Miss Joralemon was sitting up in bed. Her eyes were round and hard, the right one bright as a bird's, the left one cloudy with incipient cataract. Basil had never seen arthritic fingers more cruelly twisted.

"Why should I answer your questions?" she demanded.

"The police think it will help them, but I should warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

"The Miranda bit?" She cackled. "Nobody accuses you of murder when you're paralyzed."

"But you might be accused of perjury."

"Not me. I always tell the truth and shame the devil. What do you want to know?"

He pulled the cord that drew the curtain across the window. The material was an Indian cotton print, a busy pattern that distracted attention from a hole hardly an inch in diameter.

"I made that hole months ago so I could watch them," said Miss Joralemon. "That's how I saw George Markel night before last. He didn't know I was watching. How could he?"

"What time was it when you saw him?"

"Exactly twenty minutes after eight, a time when he says he

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was at the Zoning Board."

"How can you be sure of the exact time? I don't see a clock in this room."

"There isn't any."

"A watch perhaps?"

"My watch is at the jeweler's being repaired."

"I suppose you heard a time signal on the radio or television?"

"I don't hold with television and I threw my radio out when those mean commentators began saying horrible things about poor, dear, sweet Mr. Nixon. Night before last I got the time from Maggie Markel's own clock sitting right on her bedside table."

The small clock in Maggie's room was plainly in view. It was about three to three-and-a-half inches high, white plastic made to look like Dresden china, with gilt-edged scrolls and a scatter of rosebuds. Standing by the window, Basil had no trouble reading the time—five minutes to four.

"And you could see the clock looking through this little hole in the curtain?"

"Of course. Try it and you'll see for yourself."

He sat down on a chair beside her bed so that the level of his eyes and their distance from the curtain were the same as hers. Holding his head steady, he tried to look through the little hole with both eyes, but it was too small. He closed his left eye and looked with his right, then closed his right and looked with his left.

"Is that how you did it? Please show me."

She also found the hole too small to use both eyes with comfort. She closed her right eye and looked with her left, then reversed eyes as Basil had done.

"You can see that clock as plain as a pikestaff," she said.

"So you can . . . sometimes."

"What do you mean 'sometimes'?"

"You are left-handed, aren't you, Miss Joralemon?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"It suggests that your left eye is your dominant eye."

"I never heard of a dominant eye."

"It's just as important to seeing as a dominant hand is to handling. If you want to know which of your eyes is dominant, there are tests you can take."

"I don't care which eye is dominant."

"You should."

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"Why?"

"If your left eye is dominant, you are lying when you say that you saw George Markel in his wife's room at twenty after eight the night before last."

"What do you mean?"

"There is no timepiece in this room. The curtain is at arm's length from your eyes. You have to hold your head steady to look through such a small hole. In focusing under that difficulty there is a natural tendency to look first with the dominant eye and then with the other eye as you did just now."

"What of it?"

"In your case, vision in your dominant left eye is too blurred with incipient cataract for you to see numerals on a clockface at this distance, but when you switch to your subdominant right eye, you cannot see the clock at all."

"How do you know?"

"This is one of the tests we use in medicine to discover which eye is dominant. We ask the patient to look through a hole as small as this, at eye-level and arm's length, focusing on a small object about eight feet away, first with one eye and then with the other. When he looks with the dominant eye he sees the small object plainly; but when he switches to the subdominant eye it vanishes in a flash as if someone had snatched it away though he knows it is still there. It's an eerie experience. It teaches you what a slender hold we have on reality through our senses."

Miss Joralemon glowered at him. "Then, thanks to you, I won't be a witness and get my picture in the papers?"

So that was her motive for accusing George Markel.

Basil looked at her ravaged face and marveled at the tenacity of human vanity.

A month later Captain Grogan came to consult Basil Willing about another matter. When they were through, Grogan said, "Now you've wrecked our case against George Markel, isn't it time you found out who did kill his wife?"

"That sounds like the true word spoken in jest."

"More truth than jest. We like our consultants to build up our cases, not tear them down."

"You didn't want to convict an innocent man, did you?"

"No, but—you might as well talk now. She's dead."

"Mrs. Markel?"

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"Who else?" Grogan took a sip of Scotch. "I had to let it ride. I couldn't find enough evidence against her, but you must have known something. Did you look for evidence?"

"Not very hard after I asked her doctor how long she had to live with that heart and he said two or three months. He hadn't told the family. He didn't want to upset them."

"How did you know it was she?"

"There was nobody else once you assumed that George Markel was at the Zoning Board when Maggie was killed, just as he said, and that Frank Leslie left Maggie and went home to Doris at the crucial time, just as Mrs. Markel said. The boy was only five and loved his mother. Why else would he be afraid of losing her? There was no sign of anyone breaking into the house. So it had to be Mrs. Markel."

"Weapon?"

"Mrs. Markel hoarded quarters and dimes for the transit. A double handful weighs a lot. Put it in a limp silk bag or a stocking and you've got a lethal weapon. Wash the stocking and put the coins back in a purse or a piggy bank and the police can search for days without finding any sign of a weapon anywhere."

"How did she know where to strike?"

"George Markel had had unarmed combat training. He'd tell her about that, showing off as young men do to their mothers."

"Motive?"

"I got this only a few days ago." Basil took a letter from a folder.

Dear Dr. Willing,

Thank you for saving George. I've always felt you knew or suspected the truth, but I don't believe you know the real motive. So I'm leaving this letter to be mailed to you after my death. I wasn't half as much afraid of Maggie and Frank killing me for my money as I was of their being caught afterward. Think how newspaper and television people would have wallowed in that. It would have destroyed George and little Greg. As it is, I'm hoping they'll never know who killed her.

Yours sincerely,
Jessie Markel

Grogan shuddered. "These domestic crimes . . . "

"I know," said Basil. "French astronomers talk about the *frisson* of infinity, the chilly shiver we all feel when we look out towards the space beyond stars; but sometimes I think that what we see when we look into ourselves is far more frightening."

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Try to imagine what you would do if you were an editor and an author came to you with a manuscript and the irresistible appeal of a certain six words . . .

SIX WORDS

by LEW GILLIS

The editor looked up in annoyance. There, standing before him, having somehow penetrated to the heart of his cozy editorial sanctum, was—of all things—an author.

Automatically the editor's eyes flicked over the piles of manuscripts on his desk. Perhaps, he thought, this was some outraged author come to claim a treasured story submitted long ago and still grinding—slowly—through the mill of the gods.

But no, this author had come equipped with a manuscript of his own, which he now unceremoniously thrust into the face of the startled editor.

"Publish this!" he said peremptorily.

"Is *that* all?" the editor replied, recovering quickly. "May I remind you, my dear sir—"

"Publish this!" the author repeated, this time more menacingly. He was a large lumpy man with an untidy beard, and he looked as though he meant business.

The editor smiled expansively, playing for time. "There are, of course, many ways," he began, "to get a story published, Mr. . . . Mr. . . . ?"

"Gillis," the author stated. "Lew Gillis." He still stood with his manuscript thrust at the editor. "I am aware of the many ways to get a story published," he said flatly. "During the last several years I have had occasion to try them all."

"Really?" the editor rejoined brightly. He was growing bored.

"Without success," said Lew Gillis.

"Ah!" Things were becoming clearer. The man was obviously a disappointed author.

"I have, for example," Lew Gillis said, "submitted my stories,

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with covering letters calling attention to my previous literary successes." He shrugged. "To no avail."

"Perhaps," the editor suggested, "these previous literary successes were figments of your—"

"I have ignominiously scraped acquaintance with published authors, poor wretches of little or no talent, for the sole purpose of using their barely recognizable names to get past secretaries and into the presence of editors," Gillis continued.

"But this device too," the editor completed the thought, "availed you nothing." He smiled wearily. "And not surprising either, when you consider that editors abhor—"

"Finally," the author went on, "I hit upon a scheme which, during the last year, has brought me considerable success."

In spite of himself the editor was interested. "A scheme?" he repeated.

"An extremely simple scheme," said the author. "Nowadays when I have a story to sell I merely choose an editor, find a way to elude his secretary, hold my manuscript out to him, as I am doing with you now, and speak six words."

"And those six words are . . . ?" The editor felt some resentment at having to supply all the straight lines.

"And those six words are"—the burly author paused mischievously— "potent. Yes, yes, certainly potent."

"I imagine they would have to be," the editor acknowledged with ill-concealed sarcasm, "to achieve such remarkable results. Still, I don't understand—"

"The first response to them is invariably derisive," the author admitted, "as yours will no doubt be. Editors, as a class, are preternaturally contemptuous of authors. I would even feel justified in calling them monomaniacally arrogant."

"Surely," replied the editor, "that's a bit of an overstate- —"

"In the end, however, I have managed to convince most of them of the seriousness of my intentions. Those few I have not—" He shrugged. "Well, you would no doubt recognize their names at once. I could easily supply documentation."

"All this is very interesting, Mr. . . . Mr. . . . ?"

"Gillis," the author stated again. "Lew Gillis."

"But I'm afraid I must tell you, sir," the editor continued, probing with his foot as unobtrusively as possible for the emergency alarm button beneath his desk, "that there are no circumstances I can think of, no combination whatever of six words I can imagine,

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that could force me to publish a story, by you or by anyone else, that I did not expressly choose to publish."

For a moment the bearded author made no reply. Then once more, without warning, he thrust his manuscript, its title, and author's name—SIX WORDS by Lew Gillis, now clearly visible—into the face of the editor.

"Publish this," he began, with an air of once and for all concluding the business.

"Or—?" the editor inquired.

Gillis grinned savagely. "That," he said, "is the third word."

DETECTIVERSE

JOB APPLICATION

by C. McINERNEY

In pursuit of a self-education
He peruses each crime publication;
Studies Stout, Queen, and Poe,
Then contrives his M.O.
Is he author—or crook—by vocation?

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a *NEW* police story by

THOMAS WALSH

A new cop story by Thomas Walsh, who knows how cops feel and act, who knows what makes a cop tick. A cop? A man in uniform (or plainclothes) who is always supposed to be right where he's needed, steady as a rock, not afraid of anything in God's world, the old unshakable, the solid man. That was how Kevin O'Malley thought of his partner, Paddy Sullivan—as the solid man . . .

STAKEOUT

by THOMAS WALSH

It took them almost three months after their last foulup to discover the man's new hideout, so when they did Inspector Sanderson put on two shifts a day, seven days a week, on the warily elusive narcotics pusher named Emanuel Fidelis (Manny the Crier) Rosaro. The day shift was Jack Rawlinson and Ted Dolliver, and the night one Kevin O'Malley and Paddy Sullivan. They took over a small furnished apartment directly across the hall from Manny the Crier's; then his phone was tapped, and all the letters he got were checked for leads before they were dropped into his vestibule mailbox; while hour after hour, from seven in the morning to seven the next, there was always one man on point duty at the peephole in the hall door of Apartment 6B.

It was the usual apartment peephole, one-way glass, so that anyone inside could look out, but no one outside could look in. In addition, the four watchers had been instructed to enter and leave the building only by way of the back door, and always one at a time, as quietly as possible, so that while they soon knew everything that it was possible to know about Manny the Crier—his lady friends, his telephone conversations, his daily and nightly habits—there was nothing at all that Manny the Crier could even

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suspect about them. After the first week, in fact, there was nothing about Manny they did not know—save the one thing they had been put there to find out. All they could do, consequently, was to continue their carefully unobtrusive surveillance of Apartment 6A, and to hope for a break.

It was cold, rainy March, and never a light on in 6B, again on the strictest orders from Inspector Sanderson. From seven to eight Sullivan would sprawl out on the daybed, while O'Malley remained on watch at the door peephole; but then every hour or so, turn by turn, they changed places. Around midnight one or the other would slip downstairs to get sandwiches and hot coffee at a diner on Lexington Avenue, but when Sullivan went out on that errand he always took quite a bit longer than O'Malley.

"That's right," O'Malley would remark grimly on those evenings, never turning his head from the door peephole. "Keep it up. Just go ahead and spoil the whole thing for youself. You've got about eight months to go for your pension, and Sanderson has already told you that you're not getting any more chances. You've had too many already. And still, every time you go out—just who the hell do you think you're fooling, anyway?"

"But what are you talking about?" Paddy would demand, and with all injured innocence. "Surely you can't imagine I stopped in a barroom again? I told you the last time, Kevin. I swore to you and Almighty God, didn't I? So don't worry yourself about me. I'm a reformed man these days. There's no need any more."

A reformed man—although presently there would be a covert, behind-the-palm belch from him, and then the reek of some cheap bar whiskey all over the room. But O'Malley would not say anything more. No use, O'Malley was beginning to realize. If you had any sense at all, there was at least one thing you discovered as the years went on. There was very little you could do about changing yourself, and nothing at all you could do about changing other people.

So O'Malley would only smoke another cigarette over by the window, staring silently down at the empty street under them or silently up at the great darkness and coldness in the March sky. He was almost 20 years younger than Paddy and had a lot more than the pension to look forward to, which was poor old Paddy's one hope now, and one devastating worry. O'Malley had become one of Inspector Sanderson's brightest and most diligent young

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men and had every reason to expect a long and distinguished professional career in the department. And that was the principal reason, obviously, that he had been allowed to select his own partner in 6B.

"Paddy Sullivan?" Sanderson had repeated incredulously when the request had been made. "You mean you want an old rumpot like that to work with you? For God's sake why, man? He's been warned about that guzzling of his I don't know how many times. I've warned him myself—and the next time I find him drunk on duty I don't care if he has eight months to go for his pension or eight minutes, he'll be out on his ear. Why in hell do you want him?"

"Because maybe I can talk some sense into his damned stupid head," O'Malley had answered between set teeth. "And I guess because he saved my life two years ago in that shooting match over on the West Side. I owe him, Inspector. He was a pretty good man, maybe a damned good man, before he started hitting the booze. So I figure it's up to me to get him through these last eight months on the job, even if I have to keep him under my eyes every second."

"Well, of course if that's how you feel," Sanderson grunted. "And I'll agree with you he wasn't a bad cop until the dry rot set in. What ever happened to him, anyway?"

"Wife died," O'Malley said with marked curtness. He never wanted anyone to suspect that he was at all given to sentiment. "She was sick a long time and she suffered a lot, and Paddy just couldn't take it. But I think maybe I can still pull him around if you give me the chance. He was a solid man before the thing happened, Inspector. Real solid, all the way down the line. How about it?"

But it was one thing to finally talk Sanderson over and quite another thing to change Paddy. Even during the dead-quiet hours of the night in Apartment 6B, with March rain lashing the windows but no other sounds anywhere, O'Malley found it very difficult to point out another man's faults, and particularly since the other man was Paddy Sullivan. All he could do was to make a joke out of it, to treat the thing as lightly as possible.

"Well, I guess I'll have a grilled ham and cheese on rye," he would say on the nights it was Paddy's turn to go out. "But don't forget to stop in that crummy bar on the other side of the street for five or six shots before you come back. They'd send out a gen-

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eral alarm for you if you didn't show up for even one night, Sullivan. They'd probably think you were dead somewhere."

"But I can swear to Almighty God," Sullivan would protest. "I've never even been in the place. What's the matter with you, Kevin? Why do you have to keep after and after a man? Why can't you ever leave him alone for two minutes?"

"Maybe because he's such a damn liar—" everything exploding. "Maybe because he thinks everybody else are just damn fools. And maybe because you make me sick, because I can't even look at you any more. Do what you want to do, what you've made up your mind to do—but get the hell out of my sight. You're no good and you never were! You're even lower than a snake's belly! Get out!"

"Ah, Kevin," Sullivan would mutter, sidling miserably away to the back door. "I've told you I wouldn't, didn't I? I've sworn it to you. Why won't you believe me?"

And that was the way it always went between them. There was no way of talking it over sensibly. Paddy was very much worried about the pension—and Paddy was afraid. More and more every night O'Malley would see and even feel the edginess building up in the other man—the whites of Paddy's eyes flashing at a sudden sound or movement, the aimless cracking of his knuckles hour after hour, his jumpy prowling from window to door, from door to window.

And it came to O'Malley that Paddy could not help the fear any more than he could help the liquor. After the first week Kevin did not even talk to Paddy, maintaining a savage and almost hating silence, to hurt that way. They all knew why they were on watch in Apartment 6B, although they had not been told, and not one of them liked the assignment. Three times now certain very careful arrangements had been made to trap Manny the Crier as he accepted a shipment of heroin, and three times, when the trap door was snapped to, Manny the Crier was not to be seen anywhere around. One time could be considered chance; a second time coincidence; but a third time had to be dead-certainty. Manny the Crier had been warned, and warned by someone in the department. Who else had known about the arrangements? Who else could have told Manny the Crier about them? No, there was only one answer—a traitor in the ranks.

And so it could only be hoped now that sooner or later the traitor would reveal himself. If he wrote, his letter would be in-

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tercepted and traced back; if he phoned, his voice would be recognized; and if he showed up in person, he would be identified the moment he got off the elevator. Say nothing, therefore—just wait, watch, and saw wood. They were spying on one of their own, and they did not like it. But they did not have to like it. They could only do what Inspector Sanderson had ordered them to do.

And so O'Malley had to sweat it through just like the three others. Like Paddy Sullivan, worried half to death about losing his pension even at this late date; like Tom Dolliver whose wife had left him last year for another man; like Angie Gennaro who could not help betting on the horses and the big football games, but always betting on the losing side. Hour after hour just waiting and watching; three in the morning, four in the morning, five in the morning. But never once the call on the telephone over in 6A, the call they wanted, and never once a familiar face at the door opposite.

The peephole, also, was at a very inconvenient height for a man of O'Malley's build, which was six three in his stockinged feet. A kitchen chair was too low for him to sit on, and a kitchen stool too high. If he stood, then he was too far over the peephole. If he crouched down, his back hurt him. So he was very glad on his third week in Apartment 6B, when a close friend and business associate of Manny the Crier's called up.

The friend's name was Fingers Finnegan. He had probably got the apartment for Manny the Crier, since Finnegan lived in the same building himself, although down on the second floor; and O'Malley, coming back with the coffee and sandwiches that night, answered the recording device in Apartment 6B just as Paddy Sullivan came out of the bathroom. There was no other microphone in Apartment 6A, Manny the Crier being much too old a hand to be tricked that way; and so in 6B Sullivan and O'Malley could only listen to what was said on the telephone itself.

And it was a bad night for Paddy. Either the booze or the retirement jitters had him almost down and out by this time. He gaped around at O'Malley.

"Who?" he said.

"Just Fingers Finnegan," O'Malley said, slipping off the earphones. "Seems like he wants to talk to Manny about something. Says he'll be up in about fifteen minutes."

But it was not fifteen minutes. It turned out to be no more than two or three. Then Finnegan, a slight harried-looking man, came

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down the hall with his herky-jerky quick walk, got his keys out, and unlocked the door opposite, as he had always done when he visited Manny. "Manny?" he said. Then he sidled in, closing the door after him, and from his peephole O'Malley saw only a lamp inside, a patch of red rug, and a corner chair. That was all normal enough; that was routine; but what happened a short time after was not.

Fingers Finnegan slipped back again into the hall, glaring one way toward the elevators, then the other way toward the blind end of the apartment corridor. He was wringing his hands, almost like a man absorbed in desperate prayer, and whispering to himself. O'Malley was no lip reader, but what Fingers whispered was unmistakable. "Oh, my God!" was what O'Malley could see. "Oh, my God!"

He did not even realize he had left the door to Apartment 6A wide-open behind him. O'Malley could see the rug again, the chair, the lamp—and something else. The something else was shadowed by the chair, and he missed it at first glance. Then his eyes came back to it, and he stiffened.

"What's the matter?" Paddy Sullivan whispered. "What do you see, Kevin?"

"I'm not sure," O'Malley said, not wanting to put the idea in Paddy's head that was now in his own. "Come over here and take a look at what's under that chair, Paddy. What do you think?" Paddy replaced him at the peephole.

"Well," he said nervously, "Fingers didn't close the door after him. I can see that. But—" His breath caught. He bent closer against the door, then stiffened.

"Well?" O'Malley whispered. "What does it look like?"

"Like a guy who's lying face down under that chair, on his belly," Paddy managed. "And he ain't moving!"

For a moment they stared silently at each other. Then, bracing himself, O'Malley edged Paddy to one side, opened the door, and walked out into the corridor. There he coughed loudly, but the figure did not move so much as a finger. It simply lay there. O'Malley took three uncertain steps foward, extended his head and neck to the right, and got a better look.

It was Manny the Crier. He had his head turned slightly to the left on the carpet, and his eyes and mouth were open. An ordinary kitchen knife lay near his right hand, in a pool of dark red even darker than the carpet.

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Paddy Sullivan, just behind O'Malley now, drew in breath softly, then held it.

"But it ain't possible," he whispered. "Nobody could have got in and out of that room while you were gone. Nobody, I tell you!"

"Nobody but Finnegan," O'Malley said, wetting his lips quickly. "Manny answered the phone when Finnegan called up, so Manny was alive when Finnegan went into that room. Which means that if Manny was dead when Finnegan left it, there's only one answer. Come on!"

They thumped down the apartment-house stairs. On the second floor O'Malley made a quieting motion of his hand back to Paddy, then tiptoed along the corridor to 2E. When they got there, Sullivan flattened himself against the wall to one side of the door and pulled out his gun. His face glistened with sweat, his lips were parted slightly, and his gray eyes had an ugly hot shine to them. O'Malley knew that he looked the same way himself.

Before this Finnegan had never been anything but a cheap little grifter, not at all dangerous in a physical way. But the first time, as Sullivan and O'Malley had discovered long ago, was invariably the charm. After that, one found out how simple it was to kill a man, so the second time, and the third and fourth if necessary, were nothing at all. Therefore O'Malley was just as careful as Sullivan. He flattened himself against the other side of the apartment wall, got his own gun out, and pressed the bell.

No one answered. There was no sound of movement inside. And two or three minutes later, when they got the apartment superintendent up from downstairs with a passkey, apartment 2E was empty.

"So he did the thing practically under your eyes," Sanderson said. "That right, Kevin? You heard Manny talking to Finnegan on the phone, at about twelve-o-five, so we know he was alive then; Finnegan comes up about twelve-o-eight, and no one else had entered or left the apartment meanwhile; and then when Finnegan leaves you found Manny dead. Well, there's only one possible answer. How did Finnegan look when he came back into the apartment corridor, Kevin? Was he frightened?"

"Frightened silly," O'Malley agreed. "And something else too. I don't know what I'd call it, Inspector. Bewilderment—or stupefaction, maybe. As if—"

But a finer shade of meaning was beyond him. He gave it up.

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"I would have blown him apart," Paddy Sullivan gritted, still dirty-white in color. It was odd, O'Malley found himself thinking, how in the last few months on the job even good men came down with the retirement jitters. They just knew something would happen to them. They would be dismissed for some serious infraction of rules. They would be killed, crippled, or blinded. That feeling got to even the best of them—and now, obviously, it had got to Paddy Sullivan. His eyes had tiny desperation crinkles at each corner. His voice trembled. There was sweat in his eyes. "That stinking little rat would never have got any chance at us! I'd have killed him, Inspector! I came down here to kill him! What else does he deserve?"

"Couldn't tell you," Sanderson grunted. "I suppose he had it in for Manny over a girl or in regard to some financial deal between them. They're the usual two motives. With these fellows it's always one or the other—love or money.

"But he can't possibly suspect that anyone saw him visit Manny's apartment tonight. So I'd say he's probably in some ginmill around here, nerving himself up with some Dutch courage after what he's done—and I'd also say that he'll probably be back here again before too long. He knows, being a friend of Manny's, that we're going to have some questions for him, and he won't want to act as if he has anything to be afraid of. So you two wait right here in his apartment and I'll put Ted Dolliver in that apartment right across the hall so we'll have him both ways when he comes back. We got him this time. How can we miss? The whole blasted thing is open and shut."

And of course it was, though O'Malley still felt a bit oddly bothered. When he left that apartment upstairs, Fingers Finnegan had been blindly terrified, and there had been the other thing too, the thing O'Malley had tried, not at all successfully, to describe for Sanderson just a few minutes ago. Bewilderment, he had said, or stupefaction—and both of those qualities indicated shocked surprise as much as they did fear or guilt. Then what could have surprised Finnegan in Apartment 6A? What could he have seen in there, or heard in there, to astound him like that? It was a very queer reaction on Finnegan's part. What did it indicate? But O'Malley could not find an answer, and after a while he could only impatiently give up trying to find one.

Two in the morning came; two thirty; two forty-five. Then the elevator outside stopped at the second floor and Paddy stationed

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himself hurriedly by the hall door, gun out and shaking a little in his right hand. When the footsteps went by to another apartment it seemed to O'Malley that a touch of humor might help to quiet Paddy a little. He offered a cigarette, and when it was lit grinned widely.

"You know," he told Paddy, "that no-knock law we got passed is certainly a great thing for us. If we can prove to a judge now before making an arrest that we got good and sufficient proof a guy is working over the line, then the judge can give us a warrant to bust right into his apartment, no warning at all, and pick him up. Because when we had to knock first, identify ourselves, and then wait for him to open the door, he used to swallow the betting slips or flush the heroin down the toilet, and we'd wind up without any evidence at all.

"It's a lot different now, though. Like the last time I picked up Fingers Finnegan with a couple of other guys when he had his place over on Second Avenue. We tiptoe up to his door nice and quiet, not a sound, and then wham! We knock his door off the hinges with one smack of our battering ram and there he is sitting at the table with his betting slips all over it. But he's cute enough to have a damn tough-looking attack dog lying right at his feet, and as soon as he sees all of us rushing in on him he screams out, 'Go get them, boy. Go get them, Bruno!'

"Only the guy who sold him that attack dog must have pulled the greatest confidence swindle in the world on poor Fingers. I never saw anything so scared as that mutt was when the door crashes in. He backs off into a corner of the room, trying to hide himself, and then starts whining. Fingers jumps up still screaming at him, and that scares him so he starts piddling all over the floor. You should have seen it, Paddy. I still have to laugh when I think about it."

But Paddy's grin was still strained. It did not seem to O'Malley that he was even listening. Paddy rubbed his mouth quickly and roughly and then spun back to the door when someone else came along the hall outside. When the steps stopped on the other side of the door and they heard a key in the lock, Paddy glanced around at O'Malley, as if not quite aware that anyone else was in the room with him. Paddy backed off shakily from the door and raised his revolver to chest level.

"No, no," O'Malley whispered uneasily. "We won't need that, Paddy, not with Fingers. Put the gun away."

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But Paddy just stood there. It was as if he needed help, wanted help, and now had no one but O'Malley to give it to him. For one instant their eyes locked and held. They were still both frozen when the door opened and Finnegan started in. At that Paddy moved hurriedly, again raising the gun, but as he did so O'Malley knocked him to one side of the door with a forward lunge of his whole body.

After that it was all right; no more trouble. Sprawled on one knee and one elbow Paddy had dropped his gun, and now O'Malley quickly bent forward and picked it up. So there had been time for only the one shot, but it had missed Fingers Finnegan by at least a foot. Ted Dolliver came running over from the other apartment and O'Malley straightened himself.

"It's all right," he said, surprised how steady and normal he could make his voice sound. "Take Fingers upstairs, Ted, and then ask Sanderson to come down here to this apartment for a minute. We want to see him about something."

"Sure thing," Dolliver said, glancing down curiously at Paddy Sullivan's white and stricken expression. "Come on, Fingers. What happened to Bruno? I don't see him around no more. Decided to get rid of him, did you?"

They went off, and then it got very quiet in the living room of 2E. Paddy sat on the couch with his head in his hands, his eyes closed, and O'Malley stood over by the window looking down at the three-in-the-morning rain in the street. After a time, but still without opening his eyes, Sullivan spoke.

"How did you know?" he said. "What tipped you off, Kevin?"

"A couple of things," O'Malley said, finding that he had to clear his throat carefully first. "I never saw you so scared before—and scared, of all people, by Fingers Finnegan. That wasn't you, Paddy. Then that look you gave me just before you fired. You wanted me to help you, Paddy—even if you didn't realize it yourself. You wanted me to stop you. So—"

The other man brushed a hand over his eyes, but still without opening them. He had begun to smile crookedly.

"Yeah, I guess," he said. "But what I figured was that if I shot him down like that, without giving him a chance, I had it licked. Who'd ever figure then that I was the one that killed Manny too? But I guess you know about the wife, Kevin, and all the dough she cost me before she died, dough I didn't have. You'd loaned me all you could. Everybody did. So the first time we set it up to trap

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Manny dead to rights, I give him the tip, and he gives me five hundred bucks. Easy money, huh? Or that's what you think the first time, anyway. Only then he's got you. You can't stop even if you want to. All you can do is go on and on and on."

O'Malley did not say anything. He kept his back to the room and watched the rain. Then Paddy Sullivan cackled aloud.

"You know what?" he said. "I was the tipoff man, I was the guy we were all waiting for, Kevin—and Sanderson put me right here on the stakeout because you asked him. But I can't write to Manny, see? I can't phone him and I can't visit him—because we got all of his rat holes covered. Only tonight, when you go out for the coffee, and Finnegan calls up, it all comes to me.

"What the hell. It's just as easy as pie. I'll go in and talk to Manny while you're gone and make him get the hell out of town. Only when I do he begins whining and complaining, the way he always did, and claims he got too much dough involved to shift quarters now. If I can't cover up for him, then the hell with me. He'll go over, all right, but he'll take me right along with him. So I slap him around a little, to knock some sense into him, and he comes at me with the knife you saw—and I swear to God the next thing I know he's lying on the rug dead as a stuck pig. I don't know how it happened, Kevin. Only there he was."

"Then it's self-defense," O'Malley said, still not turning his head. "Or perhaps just manslaughter. You didn't mean it, Paddy. A good lawyer could win the case hands down."

"For a crooked cop?" Paddy grinned, with one hand over his eyes, which were still closed. "You know better, Kevin. Use your head. Only when I ran back to the other apartment I remember Finnegan calling up and saying he's coming up in about fifteen minutes, which is only about five minutes now, and I see how maybe I can get away with the whole thing. Frame it on Fingers, I mean. He'll go in there with his own key, the way he always does, and you'll see him. And I can even set up the telephone conversation for you so you'll swear Manny answered him after you came back with the sandwiches.

"That was easy as pie too. You know those recorders only work when they got something to record, so I set it back to the start of the conversation, and then, when I hear you coming, let it signal, and pretend like I'm just coming out of the bathroom so you'll answer it. So you do answer it, and the way you see the thing, the only way you can see it, is that Manny is still alive. You hear his

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voice. See how neat it all was? If you thought Manny was alive when Finnegan walked into that room, and if you found out Manny was dead when Finnegan walked out of it, then there was only one answer. Finnegan killed him.

"Only if Finnegan squawked too much and said that Manny was dead when he went in, the whole thing might take a different angle. That's why I decided I'd have to kill Finnegan too. Then who was going to ask any questions? What would anybody care about that little rat? Then there'd be nothing for me to worry about at all. I'd be free as a bird, Kevin. Just—but what are you thinking about? Why don't you say something?"

"Not a hell of a lot to say," O'Malley got out, at last turning slowly. "Just thinking about a guy I used to know. Paddy Sullivan. Always there. Always steady as a rock for you. Never once scared of anything in God's world. The old unshakable. Paddy the solid man."

"The solid man?" Sullivan asked softly. "No, no. The solid man ain't never where we think he is, Kevin. We all figure he's in somebody else, somebody who's a lot tougher and better and smarter than we are—only he ain't. If he's around anywhere at all, he's got to be right there in yourself, kid. That's where you have to look for him, and in the end that's where you have to find him. And I didn't, see? That's why I'm winding up like this.

"I didn't mean the thing. I never even had a thought of it. But when I had to find something in me that wasn't there any more, and maybe never was there—give me back my gun, Kevin. Then I'll go into the bathroom again, bless myself, kneel down and finish it off nice and quiet. That's the best way. That's the only thing you can do for me now."

"Don't be silly," O'Malley said, again clearing his throat. "You'll lick it, all right. So don't be a damned fool, Paddy. Stop talking like that."

They heard the elevator come down. They heard it stop. They heard Inspector Sanderson get off. It seemed to O'Malley then that Paddy might want a friend with him now, someone just to be near him; and so he came over from the window and sat down on the couch beside Sullivan. There, with an aimless but oddly gentle motion of his hand, he touched Paddy on the right knee, and squeezed it a little. But after that there was nothing more he could do. After that they could only sit there on the couch, neither of them speaking, and wait for Sanderson.

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The "perfect" plan to rob a bank . . .

PERFECT PIGEON

by CARROLL MAYERS

At first I didn't favor the idea. I mean, all the odds have to be on your side for a successful bank hit. But Frankie kept pressing me. Like: "It'll be a piece of cake, Joe."

"You've checked them all?" I asked.

"Every bank in the city. Security Savings is our best bet."

"Because of one character." I made it a statement, not a question.

"Exactly," Frankie said. "I've been practically in his pocket for a week. He's Caspar Milquetoast in person."

"Even a worm can turn."

"Not this worm. I *know* him, I tell you."

You've read accounts in the papers where a lone bandit tries to heist a bank by passing the teller a note threatening bodily harm, or maybe death, if he or she doesn't give with a jackpot of cash. Sometimes the bandit scores. Usually he doesn't. Usually the teller is only momentarily taken aback, then manages either to cry out or press an alarm button. Perhaps both. Whatever, it's a fiasco for the heister.

Frankie had in mind the note-passing gambit. The thing was, he had a refinement. He meant to be particular about the teller he passed that note *to*.

I couldn't fault Frankie's basic reasoning. If he could tab a teller, male or female, a real Nervous Nellie who'd be too scared, too paralyzed, to take any physical action other than complete compliance, Frankie would be home free—"a piece of cake."

That was where Frankie's "survey" came in. Checking the personnel (first by general appearance, then by discreet, in-depth, after-work surveillance) of every bank in the city, Frankie had come up with the perfect pigeon.

One Homer Jennings.

Homer was a teller at Security Savings, and the exact type

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Frankie wanted. Why Homer hadn't been put out to pasture long ago was a mystery. Certainly crowding mandatory retirement, Homer had a physique like Twiggy's and eyesight comparable to Mr. Magoo's. A lifetime bachelor, he lived alone behind triple-bolted doors and seldom went out after dark. More important, he frequently wrote letters to the newspapers deploring "crime in the streets."

Unbelievable? Not really. And he was definitely our man.

However, I still wasn't completely sold. "There's an alarm at Security Savings, isn't there?"

"Sure. A button on the floor at each teller's station."

"And you're saying Homer will be so terrified he'll simply freeze, do nothing but hand over the money? Won't even shift one foot to that button?"

"He won't risk it, Joe. He'll be scared witless, believe me."

It sounded good the way Frankie spelled it out. Also, I'd be going along just for the ride, so to speak. Because I wouldn't be *in* the bank at the moment of truth. I'd be outside, behind the wheel of a souped-up jalopy, ready to do my specialty as a crack wheelman. Which was why Frankie had latched onto me in the first place.

I finally agreed. "Okay, deal me in," I told him. "You've got a gun to flash along with that note?"

He grinned. "I'll pick up a plastic model at the five-and-dime. With Homer that'll be enough."

But Frankie didn't stop with Homer. For three days before our hit he diligently checked traffic in the bank, determining busy and slack periods. He settled on one thirty in the afternoon, after the luncheon rush and before the closing surge. He also surveyed the traffic on the streets at that hour and set up my best route to take off when he scooted out with the cash.

So there it was. A real easy score, right?

Wrong. We never racked it up. I managed to wheel clear when the alarm clanged, but Frankie never got out of the bank. An alerted guard's shot shattered his shoulder.

I have to admit poor Frankie had Homer Jennings pegged one hundred percent. The old gaffer *was* terrified—so terrified that when Frankie gave him a glimpse of the toy gun to reinforce the note, Homer fainted dead away and his body collapsed on the alarm button, kicking it off just as neatly as if he'd nudged it with his foot.

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a *NEW* detective story by

GERALD TOMLINSON

In a short essay titled "Badge of Merit," in IN THE QUEENS' PARLOR *(1957), your Editor commented on "the rough, tough school that originated in 'Black Mask' in the 1920s, sky-Hammetted in the 30s, roman-Chandlered in the 40s, and over-Spillaned in the 50s."*

We listed, in retrospect, some of the school's faults: "the lacquered style—glossy, thin, brittle; the artificially mannered restraint, the curt, clipped obliqueness . . . and the slight aura of decadence that seemed to hang over the tougher tales."

Faults perhaps—but "in a magnificent innovation of style . . . far outweighed by the three great V's of hard-boiledism—vigor, vitality, and veracity" . . .

Gerald Tomlinson, whose literary bow has many strings, has written "a hardboiled detective story à la Black Mask"—a type of story we do not often have the opportunity to publish these days. It is "not a parody-pastiche of any specific author . . . apart from its Black Mask affinities, [the story] is intended to stand on its own." And that it does—a welcome change of reading pace . . .

Now meet Matt Coleridge, 48, who singlehanded runs the World-Wide Detective Agency—a "bone-hard and metal-bright" private eye . . .

ANOTHER WANDERING DAUGHTER JOB

by GERALD TOMLINSON

Melva Dominic was a daughter of Manhattan, of the Depression, and of the man known as Charlie Corkscrew, a squat

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serious hunk with shoulders like the U.S. Sub-Treasury Building. Charlie picked up his nickname when once, early in his speakeasy days, having left his basic weaponry at home, he settled a barroom brawl in Murray Hall with a corkscrew. Fatally.

Charlie's more refined persuasive techniques involved the use of a Thompson submachine gun. He became so adept at chopping down moving targets from a careening LaSalle that the Boss of All Bosses smiled on him. Charlie smiled back. Foolishly.

One night early in Herbert Hoover's reign, following a noisy, four-corpse fracas in front of Angie's Rainbow Gardens on Lexington Avenue, the speeding LaSalle threw a rod while crossing the Queensboro Bridge on its way to the mob's hideout in Jackson Heights. In the back seat of the car police found Charlie clutching a velvet-lined cello case that did not contain a cello. The interior of the case was very warm; so was the Tommygun.

The jury glowered, its twelve members unbought, and Charlie gnashed his teeth at the verdict. His pregnant wife Bootsie wailed, vowed a deep and abiding love for her caged turtledove, and shortly thereafter moved in with a curly-headed capo across the Hudson.

Despite Charlie's pleas, no one in the mob sped north to talk turkey to the governor. Charlie fretted and fumed. The state fed him and fried him. Ashes to ashes.

Little Melva, heiress to these woes, was born on Black Thursday, 1929, just four days before Charlie walked the last mile at Sing Sing, a date that Melva's mother afterward called Sizzling Monday. Wryly.

It was small wonder that Melva Dominic, a deceptively demure-looking brunette with wide innocent eyes, strayed from the path of the righteous. Too soon adrift, with a mother who, on her curly-headed capo's death from .38-caliber puncture wounds in Deal, New Jersey, lived at the Hotel Dixie and went by the stage name of Cosmic Raye, Melva soon knew everything worth knowing, and some things not worth knowing, about Times Square and West 52nd Street.

At the age of 14 Melva whistled the Dixie goodbye. Her mother, ever ready for a party, threw a champagne bash for Melva on her departure, the affair ending in a grand finale with Mama, Cosmic Raye, née Bootsie, dancing the hootchie-cootchie on a marble-topped coffee table at the guttural request of Frankie Brown Eyes Slade.

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Melva, on her own, soon took up residence with Private Jethro Henry. USMC, AWOL, a gawky recent emigre from Parris Island, who supported the two of them in a certain raffish style in a Greenwich Village walkup, using a pair of loaded dice backed up by a pair of brass knuckles.

It appears that Melva truly loved Jethro, for when the United States Marines tracked their young private to his Bleecker Street lair, she joined Jethro in a mad flight to Tijuana, Mexico. For a few weeks Melva entertained her fellow gringos by appearing onstage in scanty attire at the mob-owned Maximilian Club.

Jethro had fallen ill the first day in Mexico after eating a meal of chicken *mole*, and, unaware of Melva's stage triumphs, succumbed in less than a month to a violent case of Montezuma's Revenge.

Back in the states, Melva drifted from town to town: Newport, Kentucky; Gretna, Louisiana; Cicero, Illinois; Phenix City, Alabama. She never wanted for male companionship in these out-of-the-way places. Fresh-faced, doll-like, she attracted admirers the way a Lady Beaverkill lure attracts trout.

And then in 1962 she dropped entirely out of sight.

Which is why, some years later, a Wall Street lawyer for Mrs. John Morland Olmsted made the trek to my agency's fourth-floor office on 47th Street, west of Broadway. I'm a private investigator, the man who runs the World-Wide Detective Agency, or so say the black letters on my frosted-glass door. The agency consists of yours truly Matt Coleridge, 48, and a twenty-nine-year-old secretary who thinks she loves me.

The widow Olmsted's mouthpiece was one of those starchy, bloodless, snowy-haired gentlemen whose taste in booze runs to sherry and whose preference in broads runs from nonexistent to bizarre. He had a nervous little laugh that punctuated his sentences like fizzled firecrackers.

"Mrs. Olmsted is a very wealthy woman," he said by way of introduction.

"Prunes."

The lawyer started, momentarily taken aback. Then he caught my meaning. "You're quite right, Mr. Coleridge. Prunes, grapes, and avocados. Mrs. Olmsted's late husband, John Morland Olmsted, owned a controlling interest in the Intercontinental Fruit Company. Upon his death, Bootsie—Mrs. Olmsted, that is—became sole heir. She is now in her early seventies, in failing

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health, and she wishes to leave the bulk of her estate to a missing daughter. A woman named Melva. Melva Dominic."

I hauled a fifth of bourbon from the bottom drawer of my scarred metal desk. "Drink?"

"Thank you, no."

I poured a water glass half full of Kentucky's pride, leaned back against my swivel chair, and put away a jigger or two. "Another wandering daughter job, eh?"

"I beg your pardon."

"This Melva," I said. "She didn't like living on Sutton Place? She worked up a social conscience going to Miss Porter's School? She thought John and Bootsie were kingpins in the international capitalist conspiracy?"

"No," the lawyer said thoughtfully. "Nothing like that. Melva ran away more than thirty years ago. Back when Bootsie was called Cosmic Raye, lived at the Hotel Dixie, and sent her daughter to P.S. 191. In those days Bootsie performed every night except Monday as an ecdysiast at the Cosmos Club on West 52nd Street."

"A stripper."

"If you prefer."

"She's come up in the world."

"She will leave a sizable fortune to her daughter Melva, if Melva can be found. The bequest is somewhere in the neighborhood of eighty million dollars."

"That's a very classy neighborhood. Not many grifters living there. Where was Melva last seen?"

The lawyer built a pyramid with his parchment-white hands. "She was last seen on a street near her apartment in North Las Vegas. Fifteen years ago."

He went on to tell me the life stories of Charlie Corkscrew Dominic and Bootsie Foote Dominic Olmsted. He gave me a couple of dog-eared photos of Melva at 14. He agreed to a nip of bourbon when I showed him, first, the label and, next, a clean sparkling shotglass. Then he tottered out, leaving Melva's snubbed-out trail to me.

I tried all the usual sources—departments of motor vehicles, municipal tax collectors, boards of elections, Julius Blumberg's outfit, Infosearch, Fidelifacts, even the Ouija board I keep in the top drawer of my rusted file cabinet.

Nothing.

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In March 1962 Melva Dominic, a thirty-two-year-old blackjack dealer and sometime showgirl at The Fortinbras Hotel in Las Vegas, had vanished completely. Like a gonfalon bubble, as the poet would say.

After checking out the allowable expenses with Bootsie Olmsted's lawyer, I hopped a night flight to Vegas.

Three days later, bleary-eyed from bird-dogging, blackjack, and booze, I dragged my tired remains to McCarran Airport and slept soundly through a daytime flight to New York. I had acquired a $3000 debt, which I was pretty sure Mrs. Olmsted would refuse to pay. I had learned nothing new about Melva Dominic beyond the fact that she once lived in Apartment 2-C of the Sloan Arms in North Las Vegas.

On my second day in the Vegas sunshine I got myself a second shadow, also known as a tail.

He was a tall lean guy with a pockmarked face, gunfighter-blue eyes, and a handlebar mustache. He wore a glittering cowboy shirt open at the neck to reveal a chestful of yellow hair. He was about as smooth as Bowery bar whiskey when it came to tailing me, but he was persistent. He followed me right onto the DC-10 to Kennedy.

I've never liked being tailed. It reminds me too much of my own daily routine.

When I don't like something, I let people know.

At Kennedy I made my move. I cornered my newfound friend in an otherwise empty men's room, wedged him back between a sink and an air blower, and dug the barrel of my concealed Beretta into his navel.

"What gives?" said Harry Handlebars with a charming show of teeth, as if he hardly cared.

"You tell me."

"What's to tell?"

"You've been two steps behind me since I left Caesar's Palace yesterday. Why?"

He winked. "Why not? You're a likable guy."

I rammed the Beretta deeper into his abdomen. "Talk."

"Sure, Coleridge. Anything you say. I could recite a poem. How about 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'?"

"No poems, Harry. Just a straight story. What're you doing on my tail?"

He shrugged. "Mr. Eff says I follow you, I follow you."

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Mr. Eff was a man I'd heard about. He was a favorite of Meyer Lansky and Moe Dalitz. Mr. Eff's well-manicured hooks had scratched their way into every operation on the Strip since Bugsy Siegel, Las Vegas visionary, flagged down four slugs at his girlfriend's pad in Beverly Hills in 1947.

"Why does Mr. Eff want you to follow me?"

"He's looking for his little Melva."

"Melva?"

"Haven't you heard, Coleridge? You're supposed to be looking for a well-stacked dame, about five-foot-two, named Melva Dominic. Mr. Eff, he's got the same idea."

I turned that over in my mind. "Why?"

"Mr. Eff gives orders, Coleridge. He barks orders. You ever heard him? He sounds a lot like a wolfhound. Looks like one, too. He don't confide in me or nobody else."

"So?"

"So all I know is you're a New York gumshoe named Coleridge. You're looking for Melva Dominic. Mr. Eff is looking for Melva Dominic. I'm glued to your shirt-tail in case you find her."

"Simple as that."

Harry Handlebars stared past my shoulder. "You learn fast. Hey, there's a big bimbo behind you wants to dry his hands."

It was an old trick, but I fell for it. I turned. And there he was, sure enough, a big bimbo behind me who wanted to dry his hands. The bimbo started to apologize.

"Can it," I muttered. It was as much his men's room as mine, I figured. I sidestepped the big fellow's Florsheims and left.

My secretary had opened the office at ten sharp that morning, the way she always does. She's an early riser, also a faithful sidekick. I can be in Port Chester or Port-au-Prince, but when the big hand is on the twelve and the little hand is on the ten, Sara's hand is on the doorknob.

Sara came to me two years ago after working a while for a dentist on Park Avenue. Although she's not exactly a showstopper in looks, with freckles, a turned-up nose, bobbed hair, and a face that's a bit too round, she's no mirror-breaker either. She appealed to the dentist enough to attract his amorous attention.

This aging D.D.S. paid Sara Park Avenue wages, a lot higher than mine, but after a few weeks of having him insist on certain after-hours' activities of a nondental nature, she complained. She's not that kind of girl. But the dentist chuckled and kept on

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insisting. She gave up complaining, kneed him once when he charged, tromped hard on his foot, and chucked the job.

"Morning, Sara," I said, entering the gray confines of World-Wide's fly-specked office. It was a few minutes before noon. I stopped at her desk, caressed her arm in my fatherly way, quoted a line from Swinburne, and blew the dust from the top of her Underwood. "Any calls?"

She gave me that little-girl beam of hers, all feigned naivete, and her freckles danced. "Melva Dominic phoned a few minutes ago. She said she'll phone again at three."

"Melva Dominic?"

"Not Little Red Riding Hood," Sara said sweetly. "And you got some mail this morning. Two letters, both special delivery. One from Melva Dominic in Boston. The other from Melva Dominic in Thatcher, Arizona. The envelope from Boston is doused in Chanel Number 19."

"The vultures are flying," I said. "I wonder how they got the scent of carrion?"

Sara tapped a copy of the *Evening Standard* lying on her desk. The paper was two days old.

"Martha Talis, the syndicated columnist, that's how." Sara pointed to the column. "She must have found out about your search and put two and two together. Or else that creaky lawyer who was in here spilled it to her. Anyway, half the country knows about the missing Melva Dominic and how she stands to inherit all those buckets of ducats."

"Private eye goes public," I growled, heading for my glassed-in cubicle.

I got halfway there.

The office door opened and in walked a dream. She was tall and slim and cool and elegant, with upswept black hair and gray eyes flecked with gold. Her outfit had the look of Lord & Taylor and her walk had the grace of a Monocan princess.

She glanced at me as if I might have an outside shot at being her footman if I'd agree to shave once a day and give up the horses and the hooch.

Sara, good secretary that she was, kept her head on straight and asked this shining vision its name.

"Melva Dominic," came the melodic reply. "From Roselle Park, New Jersey. I'm looking for a gentleman who calls himself Matt Coleridge."

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"I'm Coleridge," I said. "From Hunger, out of Bensonhurst. Let's float into my private office." I motioned toward the gap in the frosted-glass wall.

She swung her fashionable hips past me, lowered herself into a straightback chair, extracted a mile-long cigarette from a gold case, put it in her face, and set fire to it. She blew a fan of smoke into the charged air, watched the smoke plume toward a cluster of cobwebs on the ceiling.

My swivel chair creaked as I lifted a handy bottle of spirits from the bottom drawer. "Drink?"

"A Morning Glory Fizz, please. Light on the absinthe."

I grunted something in Anglo-Saxon and poured out two nips of bourbon neat.

"Now, Miss Dominic," I said in what I thought was a businesslike tone, "let's be honest with each other. I'm Matt Coleridge, as my shingle says. I can prove it. You're Melva Dominic, so you say. I'm pretty sure you can't prove it."

With solemn deliberation she dipped into her Gucci handbag and fished out a bundle of plastic cards, official-looking papers, and glossy photos. She handed them to me.

I bent studiously over this batch of undistilled proof. Melva feathered smoke through her nostrils.

After five minutes I broke the silence. "It's inspiring what a good forger can do," I gave my opinion. "Especially when he's teamed up with a top photographer and a first-class con artist. This assortment of junk you're carrying is practically perfect. If I didn't know better, I'd swear on a stack of Maltese Falcons that you really *are* Melva Dominic."

"Would you like to see me dance?" she asked seductively, crossing her legs and showing a lot of thigh. "The way I used to at the Maximilian Club in Tijuana?"

"You bet I would," I said. I never lie when I'm asked a question like that. "But it won't convince me of anything." I went up against the hooch again. "Listen, sweetheart, you're no more Melva Dominic than I'm Rudy Nureyev. The real Melva is on the shadow side of forty. She's only about five-foot-two. Also—"

The telephone jangled. We stopped parrying. A few seconds later Sara poked her turned-up nose into the cubicle and said, "I have Melva Dominic on the line." She looked from me to the raven-haired knockout and back again. She didn't smile, or scowl, or anything. "The Melva Dominic from Boston."

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"I'll take it," I said, grabbing the horn. "Hello, Miss Dominic."

A shy voice said, "Hello, Mr. Coleridge. I believe you've been looking for me."

"No, not you. I'm after the bona-fide Melva Dominic."

Her reply was a light lilting laugh. "Your secretary must have misunderstood, Mr. Coleridge. My name is Melva Dominic. It really is."

"Can you prove it?"

"Of course."

"Papers? A driver's license? A Social Security card? That sort of thing?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I believe it. You've found the Instant Identity Factory too. Can you buzz down to New York?"

"Yes. I live just a few minutes from Logan Airport . . . wait . . . "

"Wait?"

"Who are you? . . . why are you . . . stay away!"

"Miss Dominic?"

No answer. Then:

"Please . . . it's all a mistake . . . "

"Melva!"

"It's got to be . . . a terrible—"

Four loud reports.

In 22 years of running the affairs of World-Wide, I'd never heard pistol shots on a telephone wire. I was pretty sure I was hearing them now. Four shots, evenly spaced. Professional.

"Melva?"

The line went dead.

I slammed down the receiver. "Come on, Dreamboat," I said to the Roselle Park version of Melva Dominic. "We're catching the next shuttle to Boston. I think your namesake up there has come to dust."

To my surprise she put up no struggle. Hand in hand we dashed toward the elevator. On our way past Sara's desk I scooped up the Chanel No. 19 letter from Boston. I needed the address.

Sara gave Roselle Park a look of open envy.

The elevator stopped at every floor going down, which it always does when time is pressing. Finally it thumped to ground level at 47th Street. Roselle Park and I skittered for the front entrance.

Sunlight filtered down through the perpetual midtown smog and grime. It painted little patches of gold on the pavement. The

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street had its usual midday traffic, yellow cabs vying with Uncle Sol to bring a touch of color to the pervading drabness.

I saw a black Cadillac limousine illegally parked at the curb directly in front of us. For an instant the significance of the limo failed to register. Then I saw a glint of sun on steel. I saw a shaft of light fall on a familiar yellow mustache. That did it. I jerked Roselle Park suddenly back toward the World-Wide building. She yelped. I shouted.

Too late.

A burst of gunfire erupted from a side window of the Caddy. I dove for the pavement. So did she.

I was bruised and breathless, but otherwise okay.

Roselle Park was dead before she hit the concrete.

It was an execution, a rub-out, a murder in the course of business. I had seen gang-style executions before, but never at such close range. It was a murder without emotion, without amenities. A murder without icing.

I canceled the trip to Boston.

Eyewitnesses are usually about as valuable as slag in a steel mill, but this time half a dozen bystanders gave the police the license number of the Caddy. A young black kid even chased the limo for two blocks on foot, finally losing it west of Ninth Avenue when he was tackled by an alert patrolman. The kid was frisked, questioned, and released.

The car was recovered on Eleventh Avenue a few minutes later. It had been stolen an hour back from an East Side parking lot.

After telling my story to a sleepy-eyed detective sergeant from Homicide, I rode the elevator back to World-Wide. I felt washed-out, depressed.

The fourth floor hadn't changed much. It was still in need of demolition.

Sara knew nothing about the shooting below, but she didn't act too concerned. She yawned when I told her about it, and went back to her reading. Since there hadn't been much filing or typing to do the last few months, she'd been leafing her way through a pile of Agatha Christie novels. An avid fan of the Great Dame, she pored over Agatha's urbane puzzles, she said, to escape the harsh realities of 47th Street.

Back in my office I wearily traced down the telephone number for an address on Hennissy Street, Thatcher, Arizona, where the third Melva Dominic claimed to live.

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I guess she did live there, because the noise I got when I called the number was a lot of anguished wailing at the other end of the line. Something about a Louise Sprague—"poor dear Louise!"—who had just been gunned down at the Tucson airport while waiting for a flight to New York.

I hung up and told Sara the latest casualty count.

Three Melva Dominics.

All dead.

Then it hit me like a bolo punch. The killings might not be over yet. There might be another murder to go. There was at least one more Melva Dominic on the loose—the one who had phoned this morning and talked to Sara. She was supposed to call back at three.

I checked my Timex. 2:59. A minute passed. The phone rang.

"Mr. Coleridge?" It was a throaty feminine voice, the kind that can cozen hardheaded businessmen out of yachts and sables, diamonds and negotiables. The South oozed out of that voice like juice oozing from chitlins.

"Melva?"

"Why, Mr. Coleridge, how wonderful of you! Did you recognize my voice? I'll bet you caught my act in Cal City or Reno! Am I right?"

"No, Melva. This is the first time I've caught your act. And listen, doll, you'd better drop that act pretty quick if you want to keep your lungs vacuuming air. It's open season on Melva Dominics."

Her laugh had the same carefree trill as one I'd heard that morning—from a lady whose corpse was now on its way to the Boston city morgue.

"Where do you live, Melva?"

"Why, Mr. Coleridge, you shameless shamus, you! I don't give out my address. Not like that, not at the drop of a hint!"

"I'm not trying to date you, doll. 'Love is not all,' as the green-eyed poet says. Besides, my bulletproof vest is at the cleaners, and with you in sight I'd need it. I'm trying to protect you."

"How *sweet!* Mr. Coleridge, you sound like such a strong chivalrous man. I can hardly resist you. A brave detective, and tough."

Tough, I thought. That's me. Coleridge is tough. Tough as a three-dollar steak, but with a heart as big as a wheel of cheddar cheese and as soft as a wedge of brie.

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I took notice to the bourbon, lowering the glass carefully toward one of the 200 or more rings of brown stain that decorate the gray enamel of my desk.

"Listen, Melva. Tell me where I can find you. Tell me quick, because you're in big trouble. This is rub-out day for Melva Dominics."

She hesitated.

"Don't hesitate, doll."

"I'm at the Port Authority Bus Terminal," she said, a note of pique in her voice. "On Eighth Avenue, I think. I got in from Winston-Salem a few minutes ago."

"Stay there," I said, "and light up a butt. There's a Hoffritz store on the street level. Wait for me at the jackknife counter. I'll meet you there in ten minutes."

I chug-a-lugged the last four ounces of bourbon, filed the empty in my wastebasket, and told Sara where I was going. She blew me a kiss, then went back to *Murder in Mesopotamia*.

The Port Authority Bus Terminal, where I park my four-year-old Plymouth, is a massive building of tan brick and concrete completely surrounded by urban horrors. The more respectable social causes are represented inside by wandering missionaries and stern-faced fanatics who sit behind bannered card tables and hope against hope.

I pushed my way through the pre-rush-hour crowd at the Eighth Avenue entrance, vaguely aware that I had picked up a tail. I paused at the newsstand and tried to get a clear make on my shadow. It was easy. He was thin and pockmarked, yellow-mustached, and outfitted like a rhinestone cowboy. Harry Handlebars.

No introductions were called for. I walked up to him, yanked a hot-rod magazine off his beak, and said, "I take it there's a contract out on little Melva."

"You take it right, Coleridge," he drawled. "Fifty thousand boffos riding on her head."

"For what?"

Harry glanced around casually. "What the hell," he said. "I don't see it can hurt much to tell you."

"It'll make you feel all warm inside."

"Sure it will." He drew a hairy paw across the craters of his chin. "It goes back fifteen years. It's an old contract. Melva

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Dominic was working The Fortinbras in Vegas. She got close and cosy with Mr. Eff, the boss there. Too cosy, if you know what I mean."

"Spell it out."

"What I mean is, one thing led to another. She learned a lot about the operation. Learned about the skim. Learned where the mob's cash was kept, how it got delivered. She always had a weakness for cash, according to Mr. Eff. Didn't go in for jewels or fancy clothes, but loved that green stuff. One morning she up and—"

"Lifted it."

"Yeah. A heist. Did it by herself. A whole week's skim, which is one hell of a lot of cash."

"She disappeared."

"Like Jimmy Hoffa, only alive. She had her moves planned like a pro."

"Mr. Eff was unhappy."

"Unhappy? He was purple like a turnip. The mob was likewise unhappy. Mr. Eff was lucky not to end up the way Bugsy did, looking like a bloody Chinese checkerboard. Finally Mr. Eff had to dig into his own pocket to square himself with—well, you know."

"Mr. Eff didn't like that."

"He barked more than usual. He snarled and foamed. Mr. Eff, he's the wrong guy to cross. He put a price on Melva's head. Fifty thousand. It's still there, or was until today. As of now Mr. Eff owes a nice even two hundred G's on the contract—unless he can straighten out the whole mess better'n I think he can."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning Melva Dominics are turning up under every rock from here to Frisco."

"Hey, wait a minute. Didn't you say two hundred G's? That means four dead Melvas. My count is three."

"There's a chilled Melva down in Aruba," he said. "She probably ain't on your scratch sheet yet. Miami Max hit her about three hours ago. He's claiming his fifty G's down there."

"And you're claiming it in New York."

"Come on, Coleridge. I'm too modest to brag."

"You're not modest, you're greedy."

"Well, fifty grand ain't penny ante. I'm not knocking it. But a hundred grand would be my kind of day. Which is why I'm tailing you again."

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So here he was, Harry Handlebars, the torpedo who had iced Miss Roselle Park. Here he was, itching to cool off Miss Winston-Salem.

It was time for the refrigeration to stop. It was time to warm things up.

I threw a straight left jab to set him up, classical style, the way Sugar Ray Robinson would have thrown it. I used to work out in Stillman's gym, and 20 years ago I had a punch. But I'm not in Sugar Ray's class. Never was.

Before I could jolt him with a short right hook, he got inside me and butted the top of his yellow skull into my chest. I grunted and staggered back.

He reached inside his plaid jacket and came out with a shiny .32 automatic.

Enough with the boxing. I aimed my right foot at him, kicked his neat little .32 over the newsstand for a field goal. A well-dressed gent snatched it up off the floor, no hesitation, and ran away with it. So much for well-dressed gents at the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

Then Harry Handlebars parted company with his senses. He rushed me. He ran into a stiff solid left that I'd launched in the other direction. I heard something crack, and when I looked down at him, his eyes had rolled up toward the ceiling. He didn't move.

I did. Before the cops got the hang of things.

Thirty seconds later I was inside the Hoffritz emporium, examining an assortment of jackknives and hunting knives. I was breathing hard. There was a well-stacked little brunette standing next to me, also engrossed in knives.

"Hi," I said. "You must be the fifth Melva Dominic."

She smiled without warmth. "No. I'm Elsa Schlotterbach. But I can take you to Melva Dominic if you want me to."

I stared hard at her. She was about 45, in fine repair, with wide violet eyes, a pointed chin, and a look of quiet competence. She stood maybe five-two. Her voice was the sexy Southern drawl I had heard on the phone.

"I'd swear you were Melva Dominic."

"I thought about being Melva Dominic," she said levelly. "Until a few minutes ago. But then this nice man behind the counter" —she pointed toward a bearded Hoffritz clerk— "began filling me in on some of the recent obits."

"And you decided to pull out of the Dominic sweepstakes?"

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"I decided to tell you my real name. Elsa Schlotterbach. I think I'd rather be Elsa than Melva."

"It's safer. But not as profitable. You lose a legacy of eighty million that way."

"Win some, lose some. I know where Melva Dominic is."

"Uh huh. That's what I'm supposed to be finding out. How did you happen to find out?"

"I used to room with her. Twelve years ago."

That stopped me for a minute. "In North Carolina?"

"In New Jersey. Parsippany. She called herself Mary Hedstrom in those days. Do you have a car, Mr. Coleridge?"

"You're very fast with the non sequiturs, Elsa. As a matter of fact I do. It's parked on top of this brick-pile."

"Would you like to visit Melva?"

"What do you think?"

A few minutes later we were under the Hudson River, wheeling west. The tunnel stretched out ahead of us like a hollow, illuminated snake.

Escaping into the spring sunshine, we drove through the Secaucus marshland, past the gleaming new Sports Complex, under fluffy clouds that lay piled above Route 3 like pink cotton candy. Traffic was light, and before long the garish commercial glut of Route 46 began reeling past us like technicolor scenes from a bad movie.

Miss Schlotterbach said nothing for the first fifteen miles, just sitting over against the door and watching the mileposts loom up and disappear.

After a while she started to inch her way closer to me, and all at once she wanted to talk. The words flowed out like Southern Comfort at a three-day convention of Sun Belt politicos.

"When Melva and I first met," she said, "we both had studio apartments in Parsippany. Nobody knew much about anybody else in Parsippany in those days. It was like an old-fashioned boom town. Houses and apartments were springing up everywhere. I worked for a small ad agency, and she worked for a five-and-dime store. We got acquainted at a bar in Lake Hiawatha. We compared the wages we were making and decided we'd be better off sharing a two-bedroom apartment."

"I'm listening," I said. Her voice had a kind of dreamy quality to it, as if she was making up the story as she went along.

"Everything worked out fine. No serious arguments. No jealous

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boy friends. She lived her life, I lived mine."

"An idyll."

"Idylls went out with lances and chain mail, Coleridge. We got along."

"Until when?"

"Until '65. Early June."

"What happened then?"

She shuddered a little, and I reached out a hand to comfort her. It fell on her knee, and she responded with a karate chop.

"Do you know anything about Parsippany?" she asked.

"Only what I read in the travel brochures."

"Well, the main street of Parsippany is Route 46. There aren't any sidewalks on Route 46. No crosswalks. But you've got to cross that damn road every now and then, either to catch a bus or to get to your parked car."

"Yeah. So?"

"So Melva was crossing Route 46 one night. It was after nine o'clock, but it was barely dark. A sports car screamed out of a liquor store parking lot and slammed into her. It dragged her about two hundred feet on the pavement. Turned the left side of her into raw hamburger. The driver didn't brake, didn't stop."

"An accident?"

"It's hard to say. The police thought so. I wasn't so sure."

"Melva? DOA?"

"No. She was rushed to the hospital in critical condition. She lived for three days. Mostly unconscious. But she woke up long enough to make a last request."

"With you sitting conveniently by her bedside?"

Elsa looked at me sideways. "She didn't have any relatives."

I took that in and nodded. I figured it had to be a pretty handy coincidence, this deathbed request.

Elsa said, "Turn right."

I turned right. The newly paved blacktop under us was called Putnam Road, and it skirted a cemetery. Elsa pointed toward the stone fence surrounding it. We drove in at the main gate.

"I never knew her as Melva Dominic, you know. I knew her as Mary Hedstrom. But as she was dying, she asked me to do her a favor. Asked me to buy her a headstone. She died as Mary Hedstrom. That's what her death certificate says. But she didn't want the marker over her grave to say that. It was a lie, she said. A stonecarver will carve whatever you tell him to. And the

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caretaker of the cemetery couldn't care less. Stop here."

We stopped, got out of the car, and walked across a green blanket of grass. And there it was, neatly chiseled proof, a flat little planchet of granite standing off by itself. It said: "Melva Dominic, 1929-1965."

"Poor Melva," I said. "But no. She wasn't poor, was she? Little Melva wasn't poor, in spite of her rent-sharing roommate and her job in a five-and-dime. Little Melva had money."

Elsa looked up at me, coloring. "That's right. She had quite a bundle in her savings account. She left it to me."

"Six figures?"

Elsa frowned, laid a finger to her lips. "Let's say it was more than enough to pay for the headstone. Quite a bit more. I guess Melva must have earned big money somewhere."

"Uh huh," I said. "Somewhere."

We climbed back into the car. The Plymouth's tires spewed gravel as I whipped the wheel back toward the Big Apple, once Bright and Golden, now Cored and Peeled.

For a long time neither of us spoke. I was thinking of four dead imposters with their silly but expensive sets of forged identification. Maybe she was thinking of them, too.

On Route 3 eastbound you can see the New York skyline rise up in front of you like a paper cutout. It seems to sit there on the horizon, gray and fantastic, with no more reality than a carved-to-order gravestone in a Parsippany boneyard.

As far as Mrs. Bootsie Foote Dominic Olmsted would know, the case was closed. Melva Dominic had turned up. She was no heiress-to-be, though. She was just another slab of meat, the fifth slab to bear the name.

But I knew better.

I've been tracking wandering daughters for a long time.

I gazed across the seat. The demure-looking brunette beside me had introduced herself on the phone as Melva Dominic. And why not? That's who she was. No wild kid any more, but then neither am I.

I pulled two dog-eared photos from my shirt pocket and examined them under the rim of the steering wheel. The wide eyes, the straight nose, the pointed chin, the high cheekbones—thirty years later, but there was no question about it.

The lady sitting next to me was Charlie Corkscrew's natural daughter, Melva Dominic.

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"Six figures," I said thoughtfully, aiming the picture side of the old photos her way. "It's a better wad than you can make dealing blackjack. But it's a digit or two away from eighty million bucks."

"Those things happen."

"There may be an angle. I figure you're entitled to the eighty million."

She looked at me, soft and interested. "You're a sweet guy. But what would I do with the eighty million? Buy myself a diamond-studded casket?"

"You've got a point there, Melva."

"Please don't call me Melva. Not now, not ever again. Mama can keep her money."

I dropped my palm lightly to her knee. This time she didn't club it away.

I said, "Who's actually buried under that tombstone?"

She moved closer. "If I tell you, Coleridge . . . if I tell you the truth, what will you tell Mama?"

"I'll tell Mrs. Olmsted exactly what that piece of Parsippany granite tells her. No more, no less."

Her lips played across the stubble of my chin. "Thanks, Coleridge. You're a prince."

"I try," I said. "Even without my lance and chain mail, I try. Let me guess who's buried back there."

"One guess."

"Well, I figure that Mary Hedstrom alias of yours gave you pretty good cover. It kept the mob away for three years. But it was still a phony identity, with forged papers. Maybe you wanted a real identity, with real papers."

"You're brilliant," she breathed.

"You needed something bona fide. Something that would stand up against any search by Mr. Eff and his goons."

Her head rested against my shoulder.

I said, "I'd guess that Elsa Schlotterbach is the dame who's buried back there in Parsippany. Not little Melva, but little Elsa. The pretzel who died crossing Route 46."

Melva looked up at me. Her violet eyes shone. "That's right, Coleridge. I didn't inherit any money from Elsa. She was broke. Mary Hedstrom was the one with money in the bank. My money. Vegas money. What I inherited from Elsa Schlotterbach was her identity. I've been using it ever since."

I shook my head admiringly. "You're a shrewd damsel all right.

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First you bury Elsa under the Mary Hedstrom alias. Then you put a Melva Dominic marker over her grave, just in case. You turned out to be one fast-shuffling roommate."

"Was I wrong, Coleridge? Was I wrong to do it?"

"You were right, sweetheart. Right as Rilke."

She nodded. "Elsa didn't seem to mind."

I chewed on that for a while, couldn't digest it. I floored the accelerator of the Plymouth, shuddered past a slow-moving truck that claimed to be paying $4000 a year in road-use taxes. Four thousand bucks—a nice round amount, just about the fee I figured Bootsie Olmsted owed me for the caper now concluded. Not a bad fee either, but a little short of Melva's lost inheritance of $80,000,000.

Four thousand bucks. Chicken feed to the nabobs, but to me it was T-bone steak, with plenty of hooch to wash it down. The fee wouldn't buy much at Cartier's, but it represented a lot more cash then I'd had on the World-Wide books since—when? Since a couple of years back, I guess, when Pick-Up-Sticks came in at Aqueduct at 300-to-1.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 489th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . If someone gets a raw deal and can't get satisfaction from the law, what is he supposed to do?

The author, Charles R. McConnell, is in his early forties and has a B.S. in Industrial Engineering, plus an M.B.A. degree. He works for the Hospital Association of New York State, dividing his time between management consulting and teaching. He is married, has four children, and pursues writing as his chief hobby. He writes everywhere—as part of his job, in airports and airplanes, and in hotel rooms. He enjoys tennis, gardening, and "anything having to do with water, whether on, in, or under" . . .

THE LAST OF JOHNNY

by CHARLES R. McCONNELL

Well, considering your concern—being with the credit bureau and all—I guess I can fill you in. Ordinarily folks here don't take too well to outsiders asking about local business. Know what I mean?

Sure, John Walters was here 16, maybe 17 years. Did all right until a couple of years ago when he got into hot water over that money. I figure you must've heard something, or you wouldn't be asking.

Johnny wasn't from here originally, you know. Came from the city, like most everything new and different seems to these days. You wouldn't think 35 miles makes for much, but here it does. Coming out from the city is like coming back 30 years. Or maybe 35 years, like a year for every mile. Eh, eh.

Anyway, we're behind the city in lots of ways. Haven't got their high-rise chicken coops or their urban renewal, and we don't have their muggings or murders or their *de*pressed minorities. And we like it that way. Know what I mean?

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Johnny was about 20 when he came here looking for work. College dropout—one of them. Don't know if he was trying to find himself or whatever it is they all try to do, but he did find something—a job in the office at Barry's Cannery.

And he found a wife a couple of years later. She wasn't from here, either—she and her folks came in with the pickers one year. Strictly migrant workers, and you know *them*. Awfully pretty girl, though. Funny last name—has a 'vez or 'squez or something at the end of it. But she didn't look like your usual migrant type, not one bit.

Being married, Johnny must've felt bookkeeping for Barry's wasn't good enough any more. He quit there and got a job in the County Clerk's office. Well, not really quit—he landed the job, then when he went to give notice at Barry's they told him to pick up his pay and leave then and there.

Can't say I go along with that, but the Barrys are long-time employers here and they're inclined to act like anyone they take on permanent should feel obliged to stay. Loyalty *does* run two ways, you know.

Well, the short of it is that over the years Johnny rose up to be the chief accountant at County Hall. Highest nonelected job in the county, not counting the Sheriff's crew.

Had some odd ways, Johnny Walters did. Sometimes worked lots of extra hours, sometimes took a day or half day off when he felt like it. I asked him once if he'd been sick because he was out all the day before. He said hell no, he just wanted a quiet spell with his wife while the kids were in school.

Can't say it bothered me, but some people here look sidelong at those who don't keep normal hours.

And he sure raised a bunch of eyebrows three, four years ago when he let his hair grow. Damn near covered his ears. Yes, sir, people here sure knew who Johnny Walters was.

But I'm dragging this out. Getting to the money, that was just a couple of years ago. Some people said Johnny had made himself nearly $11,000 in one day—by stealing it off the county.

They usually don't take in much money at County Hall, except for the second and fourth Mondays, with traffic court and all, and this was the second Monday of the month.

And poof!—$11,000 disappeared. Johnny said he'd done the same as he did at the end of every day—fixed up a long envelope with cash and checks and a county deposit slip and dropped it in

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the night-deposit box on his way home. Bank's just four doors down from County Hall.

The short of it is, the money never got deposited. Johnny swore he took it to the night deposit same's usual. Cleaning lady at the office said she saw him leave with an envelope, but nobody saw him with it after that.

No record at the bank. Checked and double-checked, but nothing. The next three county deposits got there all right—Johnny said they damn well should have because he made the deposits himself. Early Friday the 15th they found out the money for Monday the 11th wasn't there.

Right away there was a lot of talk about Johnny taking it. After all, he wasn't from here, and with his wife being an outsider too—well, can't say I go along with all of it, but you know what they say about where there's smoke.

Before you ask about lie detectors and such, let me tell you they were used. Everybody at the bank came up clean's a whistle.

And Johnny Walters? Had to be talked into it. Said he'd be damned if he'd submit to an indignity like that. But submit he did, eventually. For all the good it did. The Sheriff's man who did the test—twice—said it turned out "inconclusive."

Well, Johnny was arrested for the theft but the charge got dropped. Wasn't a shred of real evidence. They went over everything about him with a fine-tooth comb and didn't find a nickel he hadn't earned in his own right. But folks talk and others listen, and—well, Johnny got suspended from his job. I suppose people *do* need to have confidence in County Hall.

Fought the suspension one hell of a while, Johnny Walters did. Ran his unemployment insurance dry and then went to farmwork and odd-jobbing to hold things together. Even turned down a couple of reasonable offers for his little house. Stubborn as hell—you know the kind.

Then about two months ago we got the big surprise. They were ripping down the front of the bank—big remodeling job—and there's this fat envelope wedged kitty-corner in the night-deposit chute. All there, $11,000.

Seems Johnny used an odd-sized envelope, a little longer than most. So there it was, jammed against the sides of the chute and smack against the top so's other deposits could slide right under it.

Right away up pops Johnny wanting his job back. He's a real

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determined fellow, so when the County Clerk gave him a bit of a runaround he took it smack to the County Legislature.

So on comes Johnny, cocky and full of I-told-you-so, making all kinds of demands. Sure got pulled up short, though, because the legislators—all eight of them, to a man—turned him down flat. Had another man in the job nearly two years and couldn't drop him just like that. Local fellow, the new accountant.

You got to know Johnny Walters was one astonished man. And angry. He lit into the legislators for a fair-thee-well. Cursed them as a bunch of narrow, prejudiced, in-bred—well, I didn't hear it myself, but I'm told it was pretty bad. Got a fair temper, that fellow.

So the money's back safe and sound in the county's account and I guess Johnny's still out of a job. I expect he's looking for work, but nobody's seen him since the day he told the legislators where to get off.

I'm told the last thing Johnny said was that this county would never make him quit, and that they hadn't seen the last of Johnny Walters. Hmmph! Don't know what he expects to do—come back rich and powerful and ruin everybody?—like in the old movies? Still, he can be one hell of a determined cuss.

I won't say it's right, them shutting Johnny out that way. But there're those who'll always wonder why his lie tests came up "inconclusive" and what other things there might've been about him that never got asked. After all, he *wasn't* from here. I think you know what I mean.

Well, sir, I've got to excuse myself or I'll be late. I don't dress this way every day, thank goodness, but I'm going to a funeral. Carl Henderson, farmer out in the east end of the county. They found him under his tractor day before yesterday. A damn shame too—the ditch that turned him over just wasn't all that big.

That's another seat open—guess there'll have to be a special election. For County Legislature, I mean—Henderson was a legislator. So was poor Axel—ran the service station out at the six corners. It was only two, maybe three days after they turned Johnny down—the whole station went up like a bomb. Sheriff's men think Axel got too close to a gas tank with his cutting torch.

Then there was poor old Sam Howard, the Chairman of the Legislature. Died in his sleep. He was pretty old and ailing off an on, so they didn't bother with any autopsy. Fairly sure his bad heart finally gave out. Poor Sam, just lying there nice and peace-

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ful in the breeze through the open window, his favorite way to sleep. But this time he didn't wake up.

For a little slow-moving county that's a lot of tragedies in just a few weeks. That's three, but they say bad things come in threes. You know what I mean.

But getting back to Johnny Walters, nobody I know of has heard from him for a while. Not even his wife. But he's awfully determined once he gets his mind fixed on something, and I've got this feeling that tells me we haven't seen the last of Johnny around here.

"Q"

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

GETTING EVEN, Gripping Tales of Revenge, compiled by Diana King. Bobbs-Merrill Co., $8.95.

"Revenge is a kind of wild justice," a poet* once wrote, and to those who are like-minded, revenge *can* be sweet. This all-too-human emotion is well represented in all of its avenging forms in this fine collection of short stories and novellas. Some of the methods of revenge here are far more horrifying than the original crimes. Others, for all of their macabre qualities, manage to leave the reader with a smile. Among the sixteen illustrious authors represented here are Saki, Faulkner, Kipling, de Maupassant, Ray Bradbury, and Robert Bloch.

*Francis Bacon

THE STEEL PALACE, by Hugh Pentecost. Dodd, Mead, $6.95.

Julian Quist, the famous public relations expert, was hired to promote the most extraordinary party of the decade celebrating the opening of the Steel Palace, a luxury hotel and casino at the new gambling mecca in New Jersey. But was the man who hired Quist the powerful head of Barney Steel Enterprises, or was he a fake? Quist's search for the truth put not only his own life, but the lives of the people closest to him, at stake in this tensely exciting story of treachery and terror. Hugh Pentecost has written six other novels about Quist, including *Die After Dark* and *Honeymoon with Death.*

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 490th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . the story of two sisters, and the way it looked, both would be dead in six months. . .

The author, Susan Dunlap, is in her early thirties and married to a writer and illustrator. She grew up in New York and New Jersey, taught school in North Carolina, then did social work, first in Baltimore, then in the South Bronx, and now outside San Francisco. She likes to garden, bicycle, take advanced yoga classes, and is addicted to chocolate-covered Marzipan. . .

DEATH THREAT

by SUSAN DUNLAP

"Don't give me excuses. Do it right, damn it! What do you think I'm paying you for?" Wynne slammed down the phone.

I stood in the doorway, amazed at my sister's authority though I had seen her control situations for nearly 40 years. Even lying here in the hospital, she was still the executive, the first woman in the state to have become senior vice president of a major company. I wondered if it was Chuck or some other harried assistant who had felt the sting of her tongue.

As she looked at me her expression changed from irritation to concern. "Lynne, why are you lurking in the doorway? You're shaking. Come in and tell me what's the matter."

I walked in unsteadily and sat on the plastic chair next to the bed. "It happened again."

"What this time?"

I swallowed, holding my hands one on top of the other on my lap, trying to calm myself enough to be coherent.

The room was bare—hospital-green curtain pulled back against

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hospital-green walls. Wynne sat propped up in bed. I looked at her face, at the fragile smile that used to be strong. Funny, our features were so similar, almost exact, but no one had ever mixed us up. Wynne's compact body had always looked forceful, and mine had merely seemed small.

Then she changed so suddenly when she'd become ill months ago. It was as if her underpinnings had been jerked loose and she had sped past me on the way to old age. But even now, from a distance we were indistinguishable. And the way it looked, within six months we would both be dead.

"Lynne, I'm really worried about you," she said with an anxiety in her voice I hadn't heard in a long time. "What happened?"

"Another shot at me. It just missed my head. If I hadn't stumbled—" My hands were shaking.

Wynne put her hand over them, steadying them with her own calm. "Have you notified the police?"

"They're no help. They take a report and then—nothing. I don't think they believe me. Another hysterical middle-aged woman."

Wynne nodded. "Let's go through the whole thing again. I'm used to handling problems. It gives me something to think about when I'm on the dialysis machine."

It sounded cold, but it was just Wynne's way. She didn't want me to feel I was imposing.

"Someone shot at me three times. If I weren't always tripping and turning my ankle—"

"And you have no idea who it might be?"

"None. Who would want to kill me? Why? Really, what difference would it make if I died? Who would care?"

"I would." Her hand pressed mine. "You're all I have. You don't know how I look forward to your visits."

I swallowed. "Wynne, you shouldn't cut yourself off from your office. Why don't you let Chuck come to see you?"

"No," she snapped. "I can't let him see me like this."

She looked all right to me—better than I was likely to look if I didn't find out who was shooting at me.

Wynne must have divined my thoughts for she said irritably, "You don't show someone who's after your job how sick you are. I've never told any of them that I'm on the dialysis machine." She shook her head as if to dismiss an unacceptable thought. "I told them it was just one kidney that failed, that I was having it removed." Her face moved into a tenuous grin. "I know all the de-

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tails from your own operation. So don't say you never did anything for me."

I didn't know how to answer. Could Wynne really hide the fact that she was dying? Chuck had been her assistant for ten years. He'd taken over her job as acting senior vice president. I had assumed they were friends, but I guess I didn't understand the nature of friendship in business.

Impatiently Wynne motioned me to go on.

Swallowing my annoyance, I reminded myself that Wynne was used to giving orders and now she had no one to order around but me. Still, I didn't know where to begin. I was too ordinary—a middle-aged first-grade teacher—to make enemies. If it had been Wynne—

"Well," she said, "we'll have to consider all the possibilities."

I shook my head. "I don't have any money, no insurance other than the teachers' association policy."

"And that goes to Michael?"

"Yes, but Michael's not going to come all the way from Los Angeles to shoot his mother so he can inherit two thousand dollars and an old clapboard house."

"I didn't mean that." She looked hurt. "I was just listing all the possibilities. You have to do that. You can't let sentiment stand in the way of your goal. I had to learn that long ago. There are plenty of people who have wanted me out of the way."

"But they weren't trying to murder you!

"Wynne, I'm the one they're trying to kill. No one would kill you now. I mean, not when you're—so sick." I didn't want to say dying. But maybe no one knew Wynne was dying. Chuck, at least, had been kept in the dark, or so Wynne thought. I was beginning to wonder if she herself had accepted it. "I mean you're not working. You don't have any active connection with the company now. How could you be a threat to anyone?"

The lines in her face hardened. "I know things. When I get out of here, I'm going back. I'll find out who's been out to get me. I'll take care of them! I'm too valuable for the company to just forget!"

I felt angry and guilty at the same time. Wynne had shoved the death threat to me aside—it was less important than her past business vendettas. I looked down at her hands, held one on top of the other on her lap, just as mine were when I was nervous. In many ways we were so alike.

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"Who, particularly," I asked, "would want to kill you?"

She didn't answer.

"Chuck? Would he really kill to keep your job? Would he mistake me for you?"

She looked at me in amazement, as if the possibility were too fantastic to believe. "Lynne, anyone—Chuck especially—who would take the trouble and the risk involved in murder would be more careful than that."

"But maybe they don't know you have an identical twin."

She sighed, her jaw settling back in a tired frown. "They know. When you've held as important a position as I have, they know." She paused, then said, "Lynne, I'm afraid you haven't made much of a case. I don't want to sound unsympathetic, but the truth is you've always leaned on me. Are you sure this death thing isn't just a reaction to my own condition? It does happen in twins."

"No, I think not. I've been through years of therapy. Our bodies may be identical, but my mind is finally my own!"

She sat silent.

The awkwardness grew. "Listen Wynne, I know you have business to take care of. I interrupted your phone call when I came in, so I'll see you tomorrow."

She nodded, a tired sorrow showing in her eyes. But I wasn't out of the room before she picked up the phone.

As I walked down the hall, I thought again what an amazing person she was. Dying from kidney failure, and she was still barking at subordinates. I wondered about Chuck—did he allow her to run things from her hospital room? Did he believe Wynne's story about her condition? Could he think I was she coming for treatment? Not likely. If Chuck were anything like Wynne, by now he would have a solid grip on the vice presidency. He would have removed any trace of Wynne and she'd have to fight *him* for the job.

Still, I stopped by the door, afraid to go out.

But if Wynne wasn't giving orders to Chuck or some other subordinate, who was she yelling at? "What do you think I'm paying you for?" she had demanded.

She wasn't paying anyone at the company. She wasn't paying any expenses at the hospital—she had full insurance coverage. There was nothing she needed.

Or was there?

My hand went around back to my kidney.

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a *NEW* Photographer story by

JAMES HOLDING

The Photographer was a professional assassin—but being fastidious, he never thought of himself by so crude a term, or permitted anyone to call him anything like a murderer or a hit-man. A "nullification expert"—now, that was a genteel and precise manner of expression. And to the Nullifier such niceties of euphemism were extremely important.

Whatever his designation or sobriquet, the Photographer's new assignment proved to be complicated and tricky—but so far as photographer Manuel Andradas was concerned, the "contract" was "worth every penny" . . .

THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE B. L. P.

by *JAMES HOLDING*

"A hundred thousand cruzeiros," said Rodolfo, and waited for the Photographer's reaction.

It came immediately. "A hundred thousand!" Manuel edged his voice with monumental contempt. "A paltry hundred thousand to nullify such a man? The general manager of Chemicals Brazil? And a North American at that?"

Rodolfo took a sip of coffee. "A hundred thousand," he repeated. "What's being a North American got to do with it?"

Manuel said slowly, as though explaining to a kindergarten pupil, "I remind you that Mr. Allen Jessup is a United States citizen, Rodolfo. He's in Rio at our government's request. Generously lent to us by his own company and his own government, Rodolfo. To teach us to operate our new chemical complex efficiently. One does not nullify such a man with impunity."

They were seated at a small table at the rear of a café on Av-

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enida Rio Branca. Each had a tiny cup of black coffee before him. Manuel had not touched his.

"I think," said Rodolfo, half rallying, half serious, "that you must be losing your nerve. You've never worried about impunity before."

Far down in the Photographer's muddy eyes something moved. Rodolfo saw it and shrugged to hide a shiver.

"A workman is worthy of his hire," said Manuel sententiously. "You have paid me more than a hundred thousand for a seven-year-old child!"

Rodolfo relented a little. "Listen," he said, "our profit on these transactions is not uniform. You know that. In this case a hundred thousand is all we can pay you and still turn a small profit for ourselves. Whoever has hired us to remove Senhor Jessup is probably poor. A ravished waitress, perhaps." Rodolfo's oily smile flared. "Or a houseboy who fancies himself insulted. Who knows?"

Manuel grunted and said nothing.

"Will you do the work or not?"

Still Manuel was silent.

"If not, I must secure another—nullification expert—to replace Manuel Andradas." Rodolfo almost said "assassin," but remembered in time the Photographer's preference for the more dignified term. He smiled to rob the mild threat of unmeant sting.

"I will do it. Yes. But purely as a concession to the poverty of your client," Manuel said with dignity. He would have accepted the assignment for fifty thousand—or for one—not only to possess the money itself, of which he was inordinately fond, but also to help defray the cost of a new instant moving-picture outfit he had read about, and coveted, in a photographic journal.

"*Va bem*," said Rodolfo, leaning back comfortably in his chair and lifting his *cafezinho* to his mouth. "It is settled, then."

"Don't expect immediate action." Manuel reached under the table for the camera case between his feet. "I need time for this one. To study it a bit."

"As you wish. There is no deadline."

Manuel said, "Is this his home address?" He glanced at the slip of paper Rodolfo slid across to him.

"*Sim*. Apartment 6-A in Harbor Towers. A highrise on Rua Paula Freitas, just off Atlantico. You know it?"

"Yes," Manuel committed the address to memory, tore the paper

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into tiny fragments, and carefully placed them in his pocket. "Can you help me identify him?"

"*Americano*," said Rodolfo. "Tall, slender, red-headed. Drives a yellow Buick automobile to and from the chemical plant."

"So," said Manuel. He stood up. "I shall find him." He hitched the strap of his carrying case over his right shoulder. "The usual proof, I suppose?"

"Of course." Rodolfo stood up too. "And one more thing, Photographer. It must not look like suicide this time. An accident, rather. Understood?"

Manuel's eyebrows made a gesture of assent. The two men shook hands, the action masking a transfer of banknotes. Then Manuel left the café by a rear door. Rodolfo sat down again to finish his coffee.

Harbor Towers, the abode of the American engineer, was built on stilts in the modern style, with a car park for the apartment's tenants beneath it. At quarter to seven that evening a yellow Buick sedan turned into the car park.

Manuel stirred in the driver's seat of his ancient car, drawn up against the curb 20 yards away on Rua Paula Freitas. It had been a long vigil. Peering intently in the fading light, Manuel saw that the slender hatless driver of the Buick had fiery red hair and was alone in the yellow automobile. Mr. Allen Jessup without a doubt, returning home from his work. A moment or two after the Buick disappeared under the apartment house, Manuel heard a motor die and a car door slam.

He felt the brief exhilaration that always came with the positive identification of an intended victim. And he began at once to plan the deed itself. Tomorrow night, he decided, when Senhor Jessup returned from his day's work, he would find the Photographer lying in wait for him in the shadowed car park.

Already savoring the moment, and considering ways and means for making Jessup's murder appear merely a fatal accident, Manuel leaned forward to start the motor of his car. Before he could turn the ignition key, however, new sounds from the car park under Harbor Towers stopped him. There came the controlled thunks of automobile doors being carefully shut, then the sound of a motor starting up and racing briefly. Manuel's eyes automatically swiveled toward the car park entrance and he was faintly surprised to see Senhor Jessup's yellow Buick appear once more.

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Its headlights came on as it lumbered from the entrance. It took a right turn and accelerated directly past Manuel's parked car.

It was almost dark now, but not dark enough to prevent Manuel from perceiving, at this close range, that the driver of the yellow Buick was no longer Allen Jessup. Instead, a hulking Carioca, wearing a battered sun visor, was behind the wheel. Furthermore, the back seat of the Buick was now occupied. Two indistinct figures—men, from their silhouettes—sat there side by side. One of them seemed to support the limp head of the other on his shoulder.

Manuel squinted with suddenly riveted attention. Could that limp lolling head be red? Wasn't it a lighter color in the half light than the hatless black head beside it? In the quick glimpse he had of it as the dazzle of the Buick's headlights swept past him, Manuel couldn't be sure.

After a moment's hesitation he started his motor, drew away from the curb, and set out to follow the tail-lights of the yellow Buick which proceeded deliberately before him to Rua Barata Ribeiro and turned left.

At that hour, with full dark descending on Rio, traffic was heavy; there was little likelihood the occupants of the Buick would realize they were being followed. Manuel, nevertheless, prudently kept several cars between his wheezing jalopy and his quarry.

The Buick led him west at a sedate law-abiding pace. Almost at once the bulk of Morro dos Cabritos loomed on his right, and as expected, the Buick veered into Rua Ulrich and headed for Lagoa Roderigo Freitas. It skirted the lake and led on northward to Rua Jardim Botanico. Manuel turned into the broad avenue only a few yards behind it. As he did so, he glanced up toward Corcovado where the last faint flush of departing daylight outlined the statue of Christ atop the mountain. Cristo Redentor's outstretched arms seemed to be calling down blessings on the darkening city spread out below him.

Near the Botanical Gardens the Buick unexpectedly swerved out of the traffic and drew up beside the curb in the deep shadows cast by the trees which here rimmed the Gardens. Its lights were immediately extinguished and it nestled in the small pocket of darkness between the Botanical Gardens and the Jockey Club on the opposite side of the avenue.

Unprepared for this sudden maneuver, Manuel drove on by,

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slowing down, however, and pretending to gape at the admission gates of the race track. A hundred yards along he found a parking place and pulled into it. He doused his lights, got out of the car, and sauntered back along the sidewalk toward the Buick.

He was still many yards short of it when approaching headlights revealed that the Buick's driver was now leaning against its front fender on the street side, signaling for a taxi. At least Manuel concluded that's what his arm-waving meant, for in a moment a taxicab pulled up abreast the Buick and the cabbie reached back and opened his passenger door invitingly.

Had the Buick broken down then? Or was a transfer being made from car to cab deliberately? Manuel returned to his car at a fast walk, pulled out into the traffic stream, and endeavored to keep the taxi's headlights in view in his rear-vision mirror. Three minutes later the taxi overtook and passed him. It carried three passengers. One of them wore a sun visor.

After memorizing the number on the taxi's bright-red license plate, Manuel dropped back to trailing distance and followed the cab into Rua Marques de S. Vicente, where it led him steadily west for some time. Manuel clung close behind, speculating on its destination. When the chase ended, even the seldom-surprised Photographer permitted himself a low whistle of surprise.

For the taxicab turned into the driveway of the Gavea Golf Club.

Traffic had thinned out substantially now. Manuel slowed to a crawl and sent his gaze up the tree-lined driveway after the retreating taxi. As he looked, the taxi's lights suddenly winked out like candles in a gust of wind. One moment they were there, proceeding toward the clubhouse; the next, they had vanished utterly.

Manuel whistled again, this time in bewilderment. Strange. To extinguish one's lights the moment one turned into the dark driveway of a swank golf club.

Promptly he turned into the driveway himself. After all, why not? He was not a member of the golf club, true. But he had photographed, for the society columns of *Rio Illustrated*, many people who were. He flipped on his upper-beam headlights. The club driveway was empty, clear up to the distant grove of trees which sheltered the clubhouse. So the taxi had not only killed its lights; it had disappeared.

Immediately he understood how. For 50 yards up the driveway

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a narrow dirt road forked off into the trees on his left, and Manuel's lights showed specks of dust still floating in the air above it. A service road, no doubt. And the taxi had quite obviously gone that way.

Manuel continued up the driveway to the clubhouse car park, left his car there among a dozen other waiting vehicles, and slinging his camera case over his shoulder, quietly returned to the service road on foot.

The dust had settled now but its odor still hung in the air. Manuel padded along the unpaved lane through the trees as silently as a cat until he emerged into the open beside the third fairway of the golf course. He halted to reconnoiter. From here, evidently, the service road took off, through the patches of magnificent orchid-bearing trees that bordered the fairways, on a meandering course calculated to afford groundskeepers and their equipment easy access from it to any part of the links needing attention. From somewhere, not too far away, the drone of an automobile engine reached his ears, barely audible because of the muffling trees. Manuel nodded to himself and followed the convolutions of the twisting road at a faster pace and with rising confidence.

In the end the smell of gasoline and the ticking of cooling metal led him to the taxicab. It stood, dark and empty and almost invisible, near a large open-sided shed that was crowded, as nearly as Manuel could make out in the darkness, with golf-course maintenance equipment. He dimly perceived tractors, lawnmowers, piles of pipe, bags of sand, a pickup truck. He threaded his way through them and found himself facing a dilapidated cottage, from which came a faint glow of light and a murmur of voices.

Light and voices seemed to emanate from the east side of the house. Manuel rounded the house corner quietly, placing his feet with care, and soon became a shadow among other shadows outside the open window of a small cluttered room. Craning his neck, he could see through the window. A single hanging bulb on a cord showed him that the room was furnished with a rickety wooden table, three uncomfortable-looking chairs, and a sagging cot.

The cot had no bedclothes on its thin mattress, no pillow at its head. But it did have an occupant, Manuel was relieved to see—a red-headed occupant who lay supine with closed eyes, unmoving save for the slow rise and fall of his chest as he breathed harshly. Mr. Allen Jessup.

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At least, thought the Photographer, he is still alive; perhaps I can still earn my fee legitimately.

His gaze passed quickly over a sun-visored bull of a man—the Buick's driver—and his short thin-featured companion who sat in two of the chairs, and settled curiously on the man who stood beside the cot, looking down at Allen Jessup. The uniform cap he wore marked him as the cab driver. And although his back was turned, something dynamic about his stance, some suggestion of purpose, determination—deadlines, perhaps—in the way he carried himself, marked him also as the leader of this little charade now being played out in a lowly groundskeeper's cottage at Gavea Golf Club.

Manuel was left in no doubt as to the charade's meaning. Without turning from his contemplation of Jessup, the taxi driver said, "At last we'll be well-armed against the day of reckoning! The ransom for this man will buy us many weapons. And lure many recruits to our revolution!"

He whirled to face his companions then, and Manuel saw that his face was scarred by an ancient burn. "From now on they will no longer be able to laugh at our Brazilian Liberation Party!" he declaimed in a rich baritone which carried a note of triumph. "Even if our Party consists, so far, of only a taxicab driver, a groundskeeper, and a clerk in a chemical plant!"

"You think they will pay, Antonio?" the man in the sun visor said anxiously.

"A hundred thousand dollars? Of course. It is a pittance, really. Somebody will pay. His wife, his employers, somebody. I promise you. He is an American, after all, and rich." He paused, then went on, "You have done your work tonight with courage and skill, comrades. I shall manage the rest. Soon we shall have many recruits and fine modern weapons." He turned his scarred face toward the man on the cot. "Meanwhile," he said, "I fear an old-fashioned knife between the ribs will have to serve for this one."

The thin man seemed surprised. "We are to kill him, Antonio?"

"He saw your faces when you took him. When he comes out of the drug, he will see mine."

"He can identify us, Paulo," said the bull-shouldered groundskeeper. "Don't you see?" He drew a large switchblade knife from his pocket and snapped it open. "Now?" he said to Antonio.

"Not here, Pedro," the taxi driver said brusquely. "But some-

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place nearby, where we can dispose of him safely, without any blood or messiness. Do you know of such a spot?"

Pedro nodded.

"Let's go then," said the taxi driver. "You take his feet, Paulo. I'll take his head. Lead the way, Pedro. And turn out the light."

Manuel withdrew into the shadows of the equipment shed and crouched tensely behind a tractor. In a moment the light in the groundskeeper's cottage went out. The cottage door creaked open, to allow the passage of the Brazilian Liberation Party, bearing the limp form of Senhor Allen Jessup.

Pedro led the way, stopping for a moment not five meters away from Manuel's hiding place in the equipment shed, to scoop up a shovel and a heavy bag of what must be sand. As the procession disappeared into the darkness under the orchid trees, Manuel stooped, removed his shoes, and followed them noiselessly.

Next morning the Photographer made a discreet telephone call requesting an immediate meeting with Rodolfo at a small restaurant called *A Cascatinho* in the Forest of Tijuca.

When the inevitable *cafezinhos* had been placed before them and their waiter had left them alone, Rodolfo nodded at the headline of the morning newspaper which lay between them and said with grudging enthusiasm, "Photographer, this time you have outdone yourself. A brilliant strategem." The headline said in inch-high letters: *AMERICAN ENGINEER KIDNAPED.*

"You mean this kidnaping?" Manuel asked innocently.

"Of course. What a smokescreen!"

"Thank you. A pity to waste it on such a niggardly assignment, eh? Judging from the ransom demand, the kidnapers value Senhor Jessup at one hundred thousand American dollars—not Brazilian cruzeiros."

Rodolfo chuckled. "The Brazilian Liberation Party! It has a nice revolutionary sound to it, Photographer! What an inspired idea!"

"I'm glad you think so. Were you as moved as I was, Rodolfo, by the indignant but patriotic tone of the note left by the kidnapers in Senhor Jessup's yellow Buick?"

"So earnest, yes, so genuine-sounding, so concerned with the welfare of Brazil's downtrodden millions. A little masterpiece, Photographer. You have an unsuspected gift for words."

"Then let me use some of them to discuss with you my hundred thousand cruzeiros," said Manuel somberly.

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Tapping the newspaper, Rodolfo said, "After reading this, our client may be willing to go a little higher."

"Let us hope so." Manuel paused. "I depend on you to point out to him two relevant facts for his consideration."

"What facts?"

Manuel said, "If we review the many kidnapings that have occurred in Brazil, as well as in neighboring countries, it is quite clear that whether or not the ransom demands are met, the kidnap victims are frequently executed, notwithstanding."

Rodolfo's long lips lifted in an oily grin. "I realize that. And in the case of Senhor Jessup, it may happen again, eh?"

"It may."

"Well, then?"

"I only remind you that the bodies of many of these murdered unfortunates are never found, Rodolfo. They disappear forever. In which case, how can one *prove* they are dead?"

Rodolfo waved a negligent hand. "With one of your usual gruesome photographs of the deceased," he said. "At least, in *this* kidnaping."

"Ah," said Manuel, "that is my point. Suppose I cannot produce such a photograph?"

Rodolfo strove to keep his voice level. "Is that a threat?"

"Not at all. But it brings me to the other fact your client should consider when assessing the value of my services in this matter."

"Which is?"

"That I am *not* the kidnaper of Senhor Jessup."

Rodolfo, startled, set his coffee cup down with a rattle. "You prevaricate, I think," he said hoarsely. "If not you, then who?"

Manuel reached across the table, took Rodolfo's wrist in his hand, and squeezed it until the wrist bones cracked and grated. "I permit no man to call me a liar," he said in a murmur.

Rodolfo turned pale, gasped with pain. "*Desculpe-me!* I am sorry. I meant nothing."

Manuel dropped his wrist and went on unhurriedly, "Since it is not I who is responsible for this kidnaping, I conclude that the Brazilian Liberation Party is behind it, just as the kidnap note proclaimed. And therefore if, during the kidnaping, Senhor Jessup regrettably should die, and you are unable to prove to your client that he is really dead, then the Big Ones lose their profit and I lose my paltry hundred thousand cruzeiros. Do you understand me?"

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Rodolfo rubbed his wrist. Call it lying, call it negotiating for more money, call it anything you liked, Rodolfo still firmly believed that Manuel had engineered the kidnaping of Allen Jessup. He said, "And so, Photographer, what can we do? Without proof of death, the deal is off." He paused, weighing his options, and at length continued smoothly, "You see, in Jessup's case, we *must* have incontrovertible proof, since a life insurance policy is involved."

Manuel said expressionlessly, "Then your client, after all, is not a ravished waitress or an insulted house servant?"

"No." Rodolfo essayed a deprecatory smile. "That was *our* smokescreen, you see."

"And there happens to be a suicide clause in the insurance policy?"

"There may be. In any event, I suppose we shall have to withdraw from the affair." Then, cunningly, Rodolfo added, "We must, of course, return our client's money to him—including your advance payment."

Manuel raised his eyebrows. "Advance payment? You made it clear that a hundred thousand cruzeiros was the entire price."

"True. But in the light of the brilliant kidnaping, which we assumed *you* had carried out, I was authorized this morning by the Big Ones to offer you half a million."

"That, you will agree, Rodolfo, is a far more suitable fee," Manuel said, hiding his satisfaction. "I shall do my utmost to earn it honorably."

"What!" Rodolfo was tempted to laugh aloud. "How can you do that if you did not kidnap Senhor Jessup? One does not nullify a man one cannot find. Would you wait until the kidnapers release him, and *then* strike your blow?"

Manuel replied, "No. I shall join the Brazilian Liberation Party, Rodolfo. I have long been in sympathy with some of its objectives. Once I am a member, I can perhaps accomplish something to salvage the situation."

"So? Well, good luck then," said Rodolfo. "When may I expect a report from you?"

"Certainly," said Manuel with a straight face, "not before the ransom is paid."

Rodolfo didn't venture a reply.

That was Tuesday. On Thursday the newspapers announced

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that Senhora Jessup, the wife of the kidnaped executive, had personally delivered to the kidnapers a ransom of one-hundred-thousand American dollars in cash, following precisely her telephoned instructions, and that she was momently expecting her husband to be released and returned to her unharmed by the Brazilian Liberation Party.

On Monday of the following week Senhora Jessup addressed a frantic appeal via the press to the kidnapers of her husband, pleading with them, now that their ransom demand had been met, to make good on their promise to release her husband. Senhor Jessup had not yet come home, she stated. She had no word from him or the kidnapers. And she and the Rio *polica* were greatly concerned. Further, although the police of the city, as per instructions, had so far refrained from interfering in the affair, their patience was not unlimited, and the massive police machinery had already been set in motion to apprehend the criminals.

On Wednesday night, nine days after the kidnaping of Allen Jessup, the Photographer pulled open the door of the first taxicab in line beside the Botanical Gardens, climbed into the passenger seat, lit only by the dim glow of the meter, and told the driver to take him to the Sugar Loaf cable station. Without comment the driver put down his flag and pulled away.

Halfway to their destination the driver felt a cold spot of pressure on the back of his neck. His passenger spoke softly into his ear. "This is a revolver, Antonio. Pull over and stop."

The driver stiffened. Another holdup? He pulled over as instructed, risking a single glance into his windshield mirror. It showed him only that his passenger was wearing a black Carnival half mask. "Who are you?" he asked, "and what do you want?"

"It doesn't matter who I am," Manuel answered calmly, "but as to what I want, I can be more specific. I want half of the ransom money you extracted from Senhora Jessup in the name of the Brazilian Liberation Party."

There was a moment of shocked silence. Antonio gulped air, swallowed, and tried a laugh. "Are you mad, Senhor?" he said. "I am a poor Rio taxicab driver. I know nothing of ransoms or Liberation parties."

Manuel kept the revolver pressed against his neck. "In that case, drive me to police headquarters," he directed.

Antonio went very still. "Police?"

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"Yes, I wish to show them a photograph. Here it is." Manuel passed a glossy print across the driver's shoulder. Antonio held it under the dashboard light to examine it.

For the space of three long breaths he stared at it. Then his hand began to shake. Regardless of the revolver, he twisted his scarred face toward his masked passenger and opened his mouth to speak.

Manuel forestalled him. "I used infra-red film," he said conversationally, "which permits photographs to be taken even in total darkness." In astonishing detail the picture showed the three charter members of the Brazilian Liberation Party carrying Mr. Allen Jessup (unconscious) out of a dilapidated groundskeeper's cottage. The four faces in the photograph were sharp and clear.

Manuel retrieved the picture from Antonio's nerveless hand. "I want half of your ransom money, Antonio. Only half. Otherwise the police get this picture, and the license number of your taxicab through which I traced you."

Mutely, like a man in a dream, Antonio nodded and clashed the cab into gear. Then, "The money is hidden at Gavea. I'll take you there." No triumphant lift in the smooth baritone now.

"Do so," said Manuel, sliding back in his seat but keeping the revolver handy. "And cheer up, Antonio. It is not the end of the world, you understand. You can buy many fine weapons for fifty thousand American dollars."

At midnight the police received an anonymous telephone call suggesting that in connection with the Jessup kidnaping they might find it rewarding to investigate the deep sand trap behind the twelfth green at Gavea Golf Club. And at sundown the next evening Manuel and Rodolfo met again, this time in the airport restaurant.

Rodolfo was dressed as neatly as a circus chimpanzee which he greatly resembled. He remarked casually to Manuel, "Well done, Photographer. The Big Ones are pleased."

Manuel said, "I trust you have brought me half a million witnesses to their pleasure."

"In your camera case under the table. I put them there while you were ordering."

"Thank you. It was a complicated assignment and worth every penny." Manuel drew on a cigarette and gave Rodolfo a quizzical look. "Was my proof of death satisfactory?"

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"The picture in every newspaper? The body in the bunker? Perfectly satisfactory."

"Your client will collect Jessup's life insurance?"

"Of course."

"How much?"

"A million American dollars, I believe."

Manuel sucked in his breath enviously. "To pay the premiums on such a policy one would have to be a millionaire, eh? Or" —the Photographer's muddy eyes went to Rodolfo's—"a large and prosperous corporation like Chemicals Brazil, perhaps?"

Rodolfo shrugged and said nothing.

"Who *was* your client then?" Manuel persisted. "Jessup's wife? Or Jessup's firm?"

"At a guess, his firm."

Manuel had suspected it. A simple and familiar pattern. Jessup's colleagues at Chemicals Brazil had heavily insured his life, making themselves his beneficiaries. Then, patriotically, they had later come to feel that they no longer needed a North American engineer to manage their now-prosperous business. So they had prudently arranged a million-dollar accident for Allen Jessup.

Manuel put out his cigarette and began on his soup.

"What about you?" asked Rodolfo between dainty bites of langoustina. "I presume you collected the ransom before tipping the police to Jessup's body in the bunker?"

"Naturally." Manuel put down his spoon. "But I must tell you, Rodolfo, that I appropriated only half of the ransom for my personal use."

"So? And who got the other half?"

"The Brazilian Liberation Party," Manuel said, "to carry on its work. I told you I approved heartily of some of its goals."

Rodolfo laughed aloud, spraying small bits of langoustina. "By God, Photographer, you are a devious man! In the slang of our North American cousins, you kill me!"

Manuel regarded him with distaste. "It would give me great pleasure to do so," he said quietly, "if the price was right."

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF THIRD STORIES

Dorothy Benjamin's first two stories—rather, her two "first stories"—appeared back to back in our September 1976 issue. They were excellent debuts in print—"Sound of a Distant Echo" and "The Shrew." Now, in her third story, she tries something different—the always challenging experiment of combining humor and homicide . . .

THE FAMILY OF E'S

by DOROTHY BENJAMIN

The two things Elvira Goodsill hated most in this world were children and housework. Both, in one way or another, had complicated her life up to, and including, the three years of her marriage to Norbert Goodsill.

Elvira was not much more than a toddler herself when she began looking after her younger sister, Eloise. By the time Elvira was ten, two more siblings had been added to her charge—Eugen and Endorra—with Egbert momentarily expected to arrive on the scene.

During the last days of each of her mother's confinements, and the initial weeks of the newborn babe's existence, the housework also fell to Elvira. Her father was working at two jobs trying to make ends meet, so there was little he could do to help ease Elvira's burdens.

Elvira's father was no more overjoyed by the periodic appearances of offspring than was Elvira. With each impending birth her mother would announce jocularly, "Another tax exemption, eh, Horace?" And Elvira's mild-mannered father, sighing, would attempt once again to explain to his ever-expanding wife a singular important fact of life—that if there wasn't enough money to pay taxes in the first place, then each new addition only served to further strain the family's limited resources.

Elvira's mother never seemed to get the point. For one thing,

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she was too busy poring over books of names from which she made her selections. She had conceived the idea of bestowing on each child a name beginning with the letter E, to match her own name of Emma—a maneuver by which she hoped to achieve celebrity status.

Another idea that Elvira's mother had conceived was to have the children's shirts and blouses monogrammed to carry out her E theme, but lacking talent for organization she could never find the time for the necessary embroidery, and that conception was aborted.

Following Egbert's birth, there was a hiatus of nearly four years, caused by Elvira's father's involvement in an accident which necessitated a series of operations. In a gesture of uncharacteristic benevolence her father's diurnal employer offered to fund the family through their sole breadwinner's convalescence, and it was the only time Elvira's family came anywere near to enjoying financial security.

But then Nature, as if to make up for being thwarted by the long period of infertility, presented Elvira's mother with twins—Edward and Edith.

Never having run smoothly before, the household was now in a constant state of chaos. With space at a minimum, boxes stood about everywhere to store the children's toys, games, and various impedimenta including, more often than not, their clothes.

Getting dressed in the morning for school was a particular hassle, with the children frantically searching for misplaced socks, underwear, and even shoes, screamingly accusing each other of hiding them in the boxes.

Elvira's mother vented her frustrations on Elvira, looking to her to establish order where she, herself, was incapable of doing so. Elvira, in turn, vented hers on Eloise, without taking note that Eloise cheerfully did whatever her older sister demanded of her, though far less competently. Eloise's lackadaisical manner where the younger children were concerned was a continuing source of irritation to Elvira.

"You let them get away with murder!" she accused Eloise.

Eloise demurred mildly. "They're only kids, Elvira."

"Even kids have to learn responsibility!" Elvira flared. There was barely three years' difference between the two, but Elvira acted as if it were closer to ten.

A serious child to begin with, her early responsibilities had ma-

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tured Elvira to such a degree that by the time she entered high school she appeared far older than her 16 years. She wore a perpetual frown, as if life was something to do battle with. It was a mark of her determination that with all her duties she never failed a subject.

The one friend Elvira made in high school was Norbert Goodsill, a senior, and that by chance because he delivered groceries after school for a local food market. An only child, Norbert was shy and had few friends himself.

Norbert began dropping around Sunday afternoons to invite Elvira to go walking with him. One or two of the younger children always clamored to accompany them. Elvira's reaction was to send them a murderous glance, but Norbert would good-naturedly agree.

The family approved of Norbert, Elvira's mother mainly because Norbert made it a point to deliver her groceries first, which buoyed her longing for status; and the children because Norbert acquiesced in whatever they asked of him. Elvira's father, fatigued from his two jobs, spent but a few minutes with his daughter's boy friend one Sunday and declared himself pleased by Norbert's deferential way of addressing him as "sir."

Although Elvira enjoyed the attention Norbert accorded her, it was the new freedom she was experiencing that she cherished. Every date with Norbert freed her from odious duties and responsibilities at home.

Coming in from a movie date one evening, Elvira discovered her mother poring over her precious books of names and exclaimed, "Oh, no! Not *again*? Why don't you name this one End? You know something? *I'm* never going to have *any* children!"

"Oh, you'll change your mind after you're married." Elvira's mother nodded her head sagely, as if that head being the elder must certainly be the wiser one.

"Then I'll never get married!" Elvira snapped.

Later, lying in bed brooding over the imminent loss of her newly found freedom, Elvira decided that marriage could be a way out for her. Her mother wanted babies, let *her* take care of them.

When she broached the idea of marriage to Norbert he was, by turns, flabbergasted, then exhilarated. Unsure of himself, he was awed by Elvira's air of confidence and no-nonsense manner, and concluded that if Elvira desired to marry him it was a sign of her

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esteem. The two eloped the day after the school year ended.

Infuriated by this display of what she termed her daughter's "selfishness," Elvira's mother accused Elvira of deserting her in her hour of need.

"You're always in need," retorted Elvira.

To Elvira, any woman with just one child was a queen, and that is how she treated her mother-in-law when Norbert brought his bride home to meet his folks. She praised to the skies the Goodsill's orderly, well-kept home, mentally contrasting it with her own. She was especially taken with the screened fireplace.

Elvira had never before seen one and considered it the height of luxury. She wanted to know what each accessory was called, lingering over their names: andirons, bellows, fireset, log hoop . . . She was not the least bit daunted when Norbert confided the fireplace was never lit.

Elvira located a one-bedroom apartment, complete with fireplace, in an older home that had been converted into several rental units, and with financial help from the elder Goodsills for the basic essentials necessary to furnish the apartment, the newlyweds settled in.

Ignoring Norbert's protests of "Couldn't we wait to decorate the fireplace until we've saved up some money?" Elvira purchased the same accessories her in-laws' home contained.

She liked nothing better than to sit in her small living room, gazing at her elegantly equipped fireplace. She was particularly fond of the stand of fireset tools she had chosen. It seemed to her the gleaming brass poker and the brush and shovel spread a glow over the whole apartment.

Elvira's mother, big with child, waddled in one afternoon to inspect her daughter's apartment and fell prey to a prolonged fit of envy. Following her visit, she took to telephoning Elvira regularly to enumerate her latest acquisition, crowing: "You haven't got a dishwasher, have you?" . . . "You don't have an electric crockpot, do you?" . . . "Have you got an electronic oven? Well, *I* have."

"How can you afford to buy those expensive things?" demanded Elvira.

"Don't you worry about it," her mother answered loftily. "I've got oodles of time to pay 'em off."

Elvira and Norbert were married six months when Elvira's new brother, Ephraim, was born. Elvira had secretly vowed not to go over to help her mother on her return from the hospital, but went

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reluctantly when her father called asking her to. As usual, she took immediate charge.

"You can't boss us around," Eugen declared sullenly. "You don't live here any more."

"Yeah," Endorra backed up Eugen.

"Listen, you two," Elvira said. "You behave yourselves and I'll let you come see my fireplace."

"Who cares about an old fireplace?" Endorra sniffed. But the fact was, none of the children had ever seen one and they were piqued by the prospect.

The evening of the children's visit, Elvira went to bed with a sick headache. That visit underlay the first marital crisis to erupt between her and Norbert.

Eloise had brought the brood over after school and immediately Eugen and Endorra began nagging Elvira to light the fireplace.

"I will not," she told them emphatically. "Everything will get dirty!"

"Then what good is it?" they demanded.

A little later, chasing after the twins, Elvira discovered Eugen and Endorra, using her cherished fireplace implements, engaged in a mock battle—Eugen thrusting the poker at Endorra, who was fending him off with the bellows.

"Eugie! En!" Elvira screamed. "Put those things back this minute!"

No sooner had everything been restored to its proper place when the twins and Egbert were at them. Elvira ordered Eloise to take "that bunch of brats" home.

When Norbert returned from work he found Elvira frenziedly scrubbing the kitchen floor as if a herd of elephants had stampeded over it. Like most housewives who hated housework, Elvira attacked every trace of dirt and dust, real or imaginary, with an almost manic zeal. She would swoop on a crumb of food on table or counter as if every vestige of human habitation was an offense and must be obliterated.

At supper she kept up a litany of complaints about the children's visit. When she paused for breath, Norbert said he was sorry to have missed the kids, could she have them come on a Sunday next time?

"There won't be a *next* time!" Elvira whipped Norbert's plate from under the fork he was using and bore it off to the sink.

"I'm going to bed," she announced, when she was through with

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the dishes. "I've got a splitting headache. Watch you don't spill ashes all over."

Norbert sat in the living room smoking a cigar, feeling lonely. He worked full time at the market now and liked talking over in the evening all the happenings of his day. He brightened as Elvira came out of their bedroom, then settled into his chair with a sigh when she announced, "I need an aspirin. My head is killing me."

On her way back she entered the living room. "You're spilling ashes," she said, her eagle eye spotting a fleck of ash on the lamp table.

"No, I'm not," Norbert said mildly.

"You certainly are!" Elvira reached for the ashtray as Norbert moved his cigar toward it. Their hands collided, tipping over the ashtray and spilling its contents onto the table and floor.

"Now look what you've done!" Elvira flared. She dashed into the kitchen for cleaning supplies, and returning, handed Norbert an aluminum pie pan. "If you must smoke, do it in the basement."

"I don't want to go down there," Norbert objected. As fussy a housekeeper as his mother was, his father had always been allowed to smoke in the house.

"Well, you can't smoke in here! All you do is make a *mess*!"

When Elvira had gone to bed, Norbert mooned about, wondering glumly whether to give up smoking rather than have to go down to the cellar like an outcast. He felt that cigar smoking imparted an air of maturity to him that reflected his new status as a married man. Not the least of it was the impression he'd made on his co-workers at the market. In the end Norbert capitulated, and carrying the pie pan, retreated to the basement to finish his cigar.

In the second year of their marriage Norbert began hankering for a baby. "We can't afford it," Elvira declared flatly, as if that were the sole reason behind her refusal.

It took Norbert weeks to work up the courage to ask his employer for a raise and when he did, was pleasantly surprised and gratified to receive it. Cannily, his boss also increased Norbert's duties, but Norbert didn't mind as he would be working inside now.

That evening he announced the news of his raise, adding, "Now we can have a baby."

"Stop yammering about a baby," Elvira said. "Who wants a baby?"

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"But I thought—you said—" Norbert stammered, "if we had enough money?"

"*You* thought! I said no such thing."

"But you did. Remember? You said we couldn't *afford* a baby and that's why I asked for a raise. So why can't we have a baby?"

"I don't want to hear another word about babies!" Elvira snapped. "I *hate* them."

Shortly after their altercation it became apparent that Elvira's mother was expecting again. "It ought to be you," Norbert grumbled.

"Don't hold your breath," Elvira told him.

Baby Eulalia was born on the eve of her oldest sister's third wedding anniversary, the event celebrated in almost total silence by Norbert and Elvira.

The family of E's might have gone on expanding, had not fate intervened. Elvira's father caught cold, and fatigued by his years of toiling at two jobs, succumbed to pneumonia. It was all over in a week.

Following the funeral, a horde of creditors descended on the fatherless home. It became quickly evident that Elvira's father had been borrowing from Peter to pay Paul—and Paul to pay George—and George to pay—Elvira's mother bewailed every repossession.

When the hospital called to point out that the bill for Eulalia's delivery was overdue, she screamed, "You want to repossess my baby?"

Unable to cope, Elvira's mother took to her bed and, like it or not, Elvira felt obliged to go home to help. Shortly after, Eugen and Endorra ran away.

The runaways' note stated they couldn't stand Elvira's bossiness, but a postscript made it clear they'd been contemplating the move for some time. Elvira's presence had merely hastened their departure. They'd always hated their names, they said, and were going somewhere far away where no one would ever again call them Yugie and En.

"Good riddance!" Elvira snorted, as Eloise read the note. "Two mouths less to feed."

Even with those two gone there was plenty to do taking care of the younger children. The twins were mischievous and impudent by turns, and little Ephraim was at the stage where he was getting into everything. Elvira spanked his bottom a dozen times a

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day, his protesting howls mingling with baby Eulalia's.

Elvira's mother was indulging in weeping spells, too, and it was only a disastrous incident at the end of the fourth week of Elvira's stay that finally moved her to quit her bed.

Norbert phoned often, in the beginning, to inquire when Elvira was coming home. He suggested she bring a couple of the kids to stay with them so that she wouldn't have to remain away, but Elvira vehemently vetoed the idea.

In the middle of the fourth week she called to advise Norbert she planned to come home Saturday evening to give the apartment a "good going-over" and return to her mother's the next morning. Her tone implied that the rooms she had left antiseptically clean were, no doubt, now encrusted with thick layers of dirt.

As it turned out, Elvira walked in Friday evening when Norbert was not expecting her. During her prolonged absence from home she had not once asked him how he was faring.

Norbert was not faring at all well. He didn't like coming home to an empty apartment, yet he was so aware of Elvira's presence that he hardly dared do anything lest he "make a mess" for which she would light into him. He contented himself with a nightly sandwich after work, because that was the least fraught with danger.

Things at work had turned sour for him, too. A former high-school classmate, who also worked at the food market, had begun jeering at Norbert for his lack of fatherhood, alluding to his father-in-law's prowess in that direction. The stockboys had joined in, the jokes becoming more and more ribald. Norbert dreaded going in to work.

When he came home Friday evening, he gulped down his sandwich and proceeded to the cellar for his nightly cigar. Brooding over his having become the butt of his co-workers' jokes, Norbert laid the blame for it on Elvira. If she hadn't refused to have a baby, he wouldn't be in this predicament.

As his resentment against her mounted, Norbert berated himself for skulking in the basement like a homeless vagrant because Elvira wanted everything her way. Look at him! She wasn't even home and he came down here every night as if he had no mind of his own. Not any more, he thought defiantly. He was going right upstairs and sit in the living room and smoke his cigar in comfort. This was his home as much as Elvira's, wasn't it?

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Settling himself in the easy chair, Norbert placed the pie pan on the table beside him. He contemplated retrieving the ashtray from the fireplace mantel, where Elvira had put it the night she had forbidden him to smoke in here, but decided he was too comfortable to get up.

He puffed away at his cigar, making plans. He was going to lay down the law to Elvira. Either she would have a baby—or else. Wreathed in smoke, Norbert became so enamored of the fantasy figure he'd conjured up of himself as boss, that he didn't hear Elvira enter the apartment. Suddenly she was standing there, confronting him.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" she demanded, her voice shaking with fury.

Challenged, Norbert's new manhood strove to assert itself. Puffing at his cigar, he slowly blew smoke into the air. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

Elvira turned livid with rage.

She felt as if something inside of her snapped. She heard a voice screaming, and only later realized the voice had been hers. She had no recollection of how the poker came to be in her hand, but she assumed that, as she had been standing near the fireplace, she must have unconsciously reached for it. Unknowingly, and certainly unintentionally, she used the poker on her husband. But only after having been provoked beyond endurance.

Which is the way Elvira described the incident in court when she went on trial for slaying Norbert.

Impressed by Elvira's no-nonsense manner, the jury reacted with sympathy. Elvira managed to convey to them a picture of a young housewife, proud of her little home, slaving away to keep it presentable while her slovenly and sloppy husband didn't care for it at all.

But the judge, an inveterate cigar smoker himself, viewed Elvira somewhat less sympathetically. In his opinion the smoking of a cigar was an insufficient reason for a wife to be provoked into taking her husband's life.

The jury brought in a verdict of guilty.

Leaving the courthouse, Eloise remarked to her mother, "At last Elvira has what she's always wanted—a place where there are no babies, and she's not responsible for the housework."

"Sit down, Elvira," the Superintendent of the Women's prison

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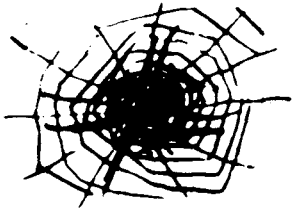
said. She motioned to a chair and Elvira sat obediently.

"You're familiar, I'm sure, with the Governor's Rehabilitation Program. Under this program the Governor is seeking a nursemaid for his six young children—his wife will be home from the hospital shortly with their new baby." The Superintendent smiled briefly.

"You will be happy to hear, Elvira, that because of the way you have conducted yourself since coming here, I am recommending you. Being from a large family yourself, it should take you no time at all to feel right at home."



DETECTIVERSE

GESUNDHEIT

by AUDREY ROBER

Every *EQMM* issue
Is grand, many more do I wissue.
What's found in these pages
Is sometimes outrageous,
But never so bad that I hissue—
And if you were gone I would missue.

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DEPARTMENT OF THIRD STORIES

T. M. Adams' first two stories were "Alfred Karns, Accessory" in our July 1977 issue and "Professional Suicide" in our December 1977 issue. It is always interesting to consider the range and quality of ideas that a newcomer brings to the genre. Are the plot ideas ones which were stored in the writer's mind during prepublication years or are they fresh ideas inspired by the new writer's finally having broken into print? Whatever the answer, if you have read Mr. Adams' first two stories, you will have to admit he's not repeating himself—a sure sign of potential growth and versatility . . .

THE ICEMAN COOLETH

by T. M. ADAMS

The snow had stopped falling at dusk, but the wind was not through with it yet. J. C. Demain, his vest bloated improbably with a lining of one-hundred-dollar bills, was waiting for room service, and brooding about the shortcomings of Democracy.

Think of it. Fourteen months before, a bare majority of good citizens had pulled the wrong lever in the voting booth and so far this winter five men had died as a result. Demain, who had some reason to fear being the sixth, took another sip of his superior sherry and murmured, *"O tempora! O mores!"* (An Ivy League education can be such a comfort—I refer to the taste for sherry.)

Demain's other favorite saying was more plebeian, a dictum of his father's: "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." It was a more useful saying too: it had brought him here, to these penthouse heights . . .

Johnny Dominetti, heir to the Dominetti rackets fortune, had entered Harvard a check-grabber, a pre-test crammer, an up-and-comer, discussed everywhere, accepted nowhere. But he learned.

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("If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.") He adopted the novocaine-overdose manner of inherited money, ran up appalling bills in the right places, allowed his grades to fall to a gentleman's C. He took to collecting jade, porcelain, and expensive redheads.

His name, which he'd changed after his freshman year to J. C. Demain, came up for membership at two of the best dining clubs. He submerged himself in the underground of the old prep-schoolers he found there, the unnoticed elite of 1960's Harvard. In his senior year he reached the pinnacle, the Polo Team, something so Old Harvard that in the New Harvard it seemed slightly illicit. (His teammates called the sport "this thing of ours"—Demain silently translated the phrase into Italian, and found it good.) Although almost no one followed the game, it was the sport that counted—Demain was a made man.

It was hard to return to the industrial city of his birth and to the family business, which consisted principally of the city's only thriving policy racket. For a few months J.C. was a sort of vice-president under his father; hard times. But a dispute with his silent partners in the Midwest soon divested the elder Dominetti of his life, and he passed on his numbers bank where he had failed to pass on his name.

In his decade's overlordship of the policy business, Demain never saw any reason to revert to his father's vulgar style. There was a remote outpost of Society even here, and he was welcomed into it with friendly yawns. His lack of visible support was, if anything, taken as final evidence of blue blood and blue-chip backing. He had a little suburban estate to house his jade, porcelain, and sundries (one sundry at a time), and a hotel suite in town for entertaining. He drove a Cord, not very often, preferring taxis. He belonged.

His small army of numbers runners took to him less swiftly than Society. They were used to different treatment, to a waiter's percentage of the take, but an extra few hundred tucked into their jacket pockets (with a Latin clasp of the shoulder and a few kind words) any time they needed it—Mama's birthday, weddings, illnesses—like that. Demain paid just a flat salary, generous enough, sure, and a fat annual bonus that came mailed inside little gilt-lettered cards every Christmas, as though he were a real bank president and they the tellers.

The elder Dominetti had also been a more public guy, after the fashion of his kind, contributing heavily to various civic groups

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and both political parties in a vain attempt to buy respectability. Demain, on the other hand, simply *was* respectable; he donated only to the designated charities of his class (preservation of historical buildings, Radio Free Europe, hemophilia; that sort of thing). Even the police had to be paid off by a middleman; Demain knew the Commissioner, but only to play golf with. And it was this cachet of class that finally won over his new underlings, this scent of attainable legitimacy that drove them into the suburbs, prompted them to trade their flashy Lincolns and Caddys for economy cars and station wagons, encouraged them to have children and put aside money for their college educations.

In short, the whole city had accepted Demain—and then the State had betrayed him.

"Proposition 13," Demain muttered. Snow drifted out of the darkness to burn against the windowpane. There was a knock on the door, and a voice: "Room service!"

Demain stripped off his curiously stuffed vest and tossed it into the bedroom, out of sight. He opened the door and surprised the wizened bellhop behind it with two $50 bills and a folded sports jacket. He spoke rapidly but clearly, "I want you to run down to Santini's and get me a sports jacket like this, only one size larger—but with the same sleeve length. One size larger, understand, but match the color and something like the style. Have one of the salesmen help you pick it out. Do it fast—they're only open until nine—and don't talk to anybody on the way, and you can keep the change, which should be twenty or thirty dollars. Got it?"

The bellhop stammered out his acknowledgment, said he'd be back as soon as possible, and departed. Demain closed the door slowly. So it had come to this. *Buying clothes off the rack*. Nausea gripped him.

Proposition 13 had brought him to this. Proposition 13 had brought the Long Winter. Proposition 13 had brought the Freeze. Worst, and last—as in "last rites"—Proposition 13 had brought the Iceman.

The Iceman, yes. During the same ten years in which Demain had made his modest mark, a less distinguished underworld figure had been carving a reputation for himself. His true name was unknown except to his Midwestern masters; his seemingly anachronistic sobriquet was a reference to the instrument with

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which he dispatched people who had proved an embarrassment to his employers.

Consider the lowly icepick. Ground to needle thinness, it becomes a sophisticated weapon. Introduced between the ribs at the correct angle, it can stop the heart, leaving a mark the size of a pinhead and a probable verdict of heart failure. Similarly, an inch of blade at the base of the skull can produce an easily overlooked scab and a cerebral hemorrhage not unlike some forms of stroke. Granted, it takes a master craftsman to accomplish this sleight of hand in public, amid a milling crowd. But such a master existed, and if he was expensive, at least his tools were not.

A few years before, at the top of his career, Demain had treasured stories about this legendary hit man, much as shipping magnates like to hear tales of storms at sea. When Demain and his lieutenants got together (there was an office for this; he didn't see them socially), after the books were inspected and the shares apportioned, he would elicit from them the grislier reports that were making the rounds about the Iceman's latest exploits. He had built up in his mind a lurid picture of the fellow: a tall, pale, black-haired man with icy blue eyes and—although theirs had been an equal-opportunity business for some time—a sinister Sicilianesque name. Vito Brevis, he had mentally christened him once; he wished he could forget that now. For now Legislative Proposition 13, the Proposition for the Establishment of a State Lottery, had brought him within days of the Iceman's pointed reprimand.

In the first year of its existence the Lottery had not drastically affected Demain's business. The numbers were cheaper to play, allegedly paid off better, and did not report to the tax man. But the next November a new Lottery Commissioner came up with an innovation, the so-called Presto Tickets, which had the appeal of the old illegal punchboards: one could find out instantly whether or not he was a winner. The tickets were cheap, too. For Demain they marked the beginning of the Long Winter of Discontent.

All November the numbers business plummeted. There was the usual Christmas slump, only worse, and the usual New Year's flurry, only not so good, and then things leveled off at what Demain had to assume was the new average—only about seventy percent of the previous year's weekly earnings.

Even so, Demain need not have suffered. In all the years he'd

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been running the bank, he had been taking a percentage over and above that allowed him by his bosses farther west. Had he dropped that luxury when business dropped, he could have maintained payments and business relations at their old high standard. But he had not, and now the Iceman had blown in from the Windy City to litter the streets with corpses.

The first killing, that of Deacon LeRoy, one of Demain's top lieutenants, went almost unnoticed. The Deacon's last night on earth was spent watching a telecast of the Lottery's grand-prize presentation. Now, LeRoy was known to feel that the Lottery was not only unfair competition, but blatantly fixed as well. (And indeed, the recipients of grand prizes were good public-relations fodder: mainly sweet white-haired old ladies, black policemen, and young couples just starting out in life.) LeRoy's wife, fearing for his hypertension, had sabotaged the TV that night, but the Deacon stormed down to a local bar and ordered the proprietor to turn on the presentation. As fate would have it, the thousand-dollars-a-week prize that night was won by a sweet white-haired black lady whose son, a policeman, had just got married; LeRoy caused an ugly scene before retiring to the men's room, where he was found later, dead of an apparent heart attack. No one thought much about it at the time, LeRoy's family and associates taking the attitude of "Why look a gift horse in the mouth?"

But when Abby Johnson and Jojo McCloud died of strokes, at a football game and a race track respectively, the word went out on the street as it hadn't in five years: "If you're hot, get out of town—the Iceman cooleth." The Freeze set in. Demain discovered that all the Chicago phone numbers he knew had been changed. His people stopped reporting to him. His operation was being purged, and he, surely, was being kept for last.

When the Iceman wanted to make an example, you recieved his unkindest cut of all, fatal but unmercifully slow—the thrust of an icepick whose loosened handle came free of the blade at the moment of impact. This allowed the Iceman to walk away with the part of the tool bearing his fingerprints, leaving the pick in the victim and no handle to remove it with.

Demain hadn't the slightest doubt that this was the death reserved for him, and he had a vivid conception of its aftermath. *SOCIALITE VICTIM OF ICEPICK KILLER*—how undignified; or worse: *CRIME CZAR SLAIN IN GANG WAR*. Oh, yes, much worse. Please, he thought, let it be *SOCIALITE VICTIM* . . .

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This morning, after one of these morbid fantasies, he had suddenly seen his way out. His former partners were double-crossers; well, if you can't beat 'em . . . double-cross 'em.

First, Demain had to understand why the Iceman had left him free while disposing of two more of Demain's top men. Demain supposed he was being watched as he made his nightly rounds, lest he escape. He also supposed that the Iceman was waiting for him to try to remove the numbers bank funds from the safe-deposit box in which they were believed to rest—in which, as only Demain knew, they actually did not. Having an aristocrat's distrust of banks, he had long ago transferred the company funds to a wall safe here in the apartment. They currently totaled just over $1,000,000.

This morning he had converted one-fifth of that into the more portable form of a fabulous emerald brooch (with which he hoped some day to resume an old hobby), keeping the rest in handily negotiable one-hundred-dollar bills.

Unless he had waited too long, he could walk away with this hoard tonight by simply appearing to follow his ordinary schedule. He would hail a taxi at the same time as usual, but instead of going to the banquet he was supposed to attend, he would go to the bus terminal. (Inconceivable that anyone would be watching for *him* at the *bus terminal*.) He couldn't carry any sort of luggage, of course. He had to conceal the money on his person . . . a problem.

With a little cramming, he managed to fit all the currency into the lining of his vest and sculpt it into a human, if somewhat rotund, shape. But this added bulk ruined the lines of every jacket he tried on over it, and in the throes of fear he was certain this would give the game away. The only answer had seemed to be to send out for a larger jacket . . .

As he rose again to the bellhop's knock, he prayed that this would do the trick, that the bellhop had not betrayed him, that the Iceman had not got impatient.

Opening the door and looking at the bellhop, a middle-aged, chicken-necked man with watery blue eyes, he felt relieved. Was this man likely to be in cahoots with the Iceman? Hardly. A glance at Vito Brevis' greasy black locks and flashy clothing, and this middle-American type would be muttering about "hippie punks" and crossing to the other side of the street. Demain's heart warmed to the man. These respectable citizens, colorless but in-

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corruptible, were the backbone of the country.

"Here you are, sir," the bellhop said.

"Thank you," Demain replied, taking the proffered sports jackets and making as if to close the door. The bellhop was standing in the way, all but holding out his palm.

"What did your tip amount to, by the way?" Demain asked flatly. "Twenty dollars, thirty?"

"A whole lot, thank you, sir. Are you sure that's all I can do for it?"

Demain relaxed and said, "Yes. Oh, would you get the elevator and hold it for me, please?"

"Yessir!"

Should have had him hail a cab instead, Demain thought, rushing into the bedroom and pulling on the vest. He tried on the new sports jacket and found it not bad, not bad at all. Before leaving he remembered the emerald brooch and put it in his jacket pocket. Were there any more hard assets around the place? No. Time to leave.

In the hall outside, the bellhop maintained his post at the elevator. The doors were just opening as Demain approached. The bellhop was standing almost in his way, and as Demain squeezed past him the bluejacket gave him a sort of affectionate punch in the ribs, a vulgar gesture of such appalling intimacy that Demain was disoriented with surprise. He stumbled on the threshold of the elevator, grabbed at the bellhop's shoulder for support, and the two of them tottered—almost fell—into the car, jostling the passenger already there. The doors closed behind them.

"Whoa!" said the original passenger, turning around. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Demain."

"Pardon me, Rogers, I guess I tripped," Demain said, recognizing the man in the security guard's uniform. "Going off duty?"

"Yes, sir," Rogers said, smiling because Demain had remembered his name

Demain knew a mixture of feelings: security first, because armed-and-uniformed Rogers would be at his side until he took his taxi; second, anger at the clumsiness of the bellhop. You tip one of these people and he treats you like a member of his teeming, slum-dwelling family. Although he could hardly hold his ribs and curse in public, such was his desire. Why had the idiot hit him so hard?

"Who comes on duty now, Rogers? Taylor?" Demain asked. Bad

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form to talk with the staff, but it could not be avoided after staggering into one of them like a drunk. At least it gave him a chance to demonstrate his expertise in the field of staff surnames—*noblesse oblige* and all that.

"No, he's down with the flu, sir. Jackson's filling in for him now." Rogers was beaming at all this attention. Ah, Demain thought, the Little Man has such little pleasures. Thinking of little men, he allowed himself a cool glance at the bellhop, who was fidgeting nervously as the notoriously slow elevator made its way toward the lobby. Demain's hand went reflexively to his probably bruised ribs—and touched something cold and metallic.

He glanced down to see two inches of steel portruding from between his fingers. The slender gleaming shaft was lodged firmly in his jacket, in his vest, and in a wad of hundred-dollar bills beneath, but not in his flesh. He looked up again.

The bellhop smiled sheepishly.

Rogers was saying something about the flu as Demain surreptitiously plucked out the icepick blade and dropped it behind him on the carpeted floor. He began to tremble a bit with reaction and then, without knowing what he was going to do, he reached for the little man. With one fluid motion he wrapped an arm around the narrow shoulders in a grim parody of comradeliness, pinning arms to sides. The Iceman looked even more sheepish. The security guard looked at them curiously.

Years of keeping up appearances brought words to Demain's lips. "Do you know who this is?" he asked. He felt the small body next to his go rigid. (As if he could tell Rogers!)

The guard shook his head. Demain babbled on, "My uncle! My long lost uncle . . . Mr. Brevis. An interesting story, Rogers. You see, back in 1920, Grandfather Demain disinherited Mr. Brevis' father for good cause and that whole branch of the family dropped from sight. But my own dad, the Commodore, always wanted to patch things up. Detectives finally came up with a photograph of Uncle Vi—Uncle Victor here, but that was all. Until tonight, when I ring for room service and who should walk in but the man himself? If only Dad were alive to see it." He gave the little man an extra squeeze.

"That's wonderful, Mr. Demain," Rogers said, his honest face awash with sentimentality. "I guess you're going out to celebrate, huh? Sir?"

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"Aw, we've been celebrating, Rogers. I guess you could tell that, the way we came stumbling in here." These humiliating fabrications were almost liberating, in a perverse sort of way. Worth thinking about, if he got out of this alive. "We drank everything I had in my room, and then we ordered a bottle of sparkling burgundy from downstairs, and when I tried to open it, what do you think I found?"

"I don't know, sir," Rogers said, grinning widely.

"I found—I couldn't find—the corkscrew, Rogers. No corkscrew!" He actually felt a little drunk. Adrenalin, probably. "So I said to my Uncle Victor here, I said to him, 'Uncle Victor, see if you can open it with the icepick.' And he said, 'Okay,' and do you know what he did?" Rogers shook his head.

"He broke it! He broke the icepick. Show him the handle, Uncle Victor."

The little man just stood there for a moment, vibrating like a plucked piano string, then opened his tight-clenched hand to reveal an icepick handle. A bead of sweat fell onto it, from his nose. The elevator doors opened then, and the little man gave a violent start as light flooded the car.

"Can I walk you to the door, Mr. Demain?" Rogers asked.

"Why, thank you, Rogers, we'd appreciate it." The Iceman squirmed a bit, but Demain's arm had the sinew that only a lifetime of golf, tennis, and swimming can impart. The three of them traversed the mirrored lobby, Demain telling the guard a rather ribald joke—just one of the guys after all.

The air outside was icy, not so much bracing as numbing. (He realized he could have worn—and stuffed—a heavy winter coat. He need never have called room service.) Rogers was looking for a taxi, but there were none to be seen.

"Where's Charles?" Demain asked, referring to the doorman.

"Running errands, I guess, Mr. Demain," Rogers replied. "Not much work for him out here. Taxi strike, you know."

"Another strike," Demain said. "It's been a hard winter, hasn't it?"

A cold wind blew. The little man squirmed. Demain's arm was getting tired.

Rogers cleared his throat. "What I meant was, you can't get a taxi, Mr. Demain, see what I mean? Do you want one of the guys to bring your car around front?"

Demain made a noncommittal sound. He didn't want to freeze

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to death standing here, proudly holding the little assassin as though he were some sort of athletic trophy; but on the other hand he didn't know what else to do with him. He couldn't even be sure that the little viper was entirely defanged. He was trying to think of some way to keep Rogers with him when suddenly the Iceman spoke up, like a troll from beneath a bridge.

"Let's take the subway, J.C.," the little man said. Demain tightened his grip, but this only seemed to squeeze out more words. "C'mon, Johnny. We don't want to be late. Let's take the subway."

The last thing Demain wanted to be was "the late" J. C. Demain, and a glance at the shadowed subway kiosk on the corner seemed to threaten as much, should the little man get him there alone.

Demain shook his head as Rogers spoke, "You guys aren't dressed very warm, if you don't mind me saying so. And I wouldn't take the subway this time of night if I was you, Mr. Demain."

Demain's free hand was getting cold. He thrust it into his jacket pocket, flexing it indecisively.

Something pricked his finger.

"There's hardly anybody down there this time of night," Rogers continued. "Anything could happen."

It was the emerald brooch. The pin had come free from the clasp.

"I'll look after him okay," the little man gibbered. "Let's take the subway, kid."

Demain ran his finger along the shaft of the pin. At least an inch and a half long, and sturdy, the body of the brooch providing a sort of handle. The little man looked up at him with longing. Perhaps he only wanted to escape—but wasn't there a touch of calculation there? After all, he was the Iceman and Demain was well aware—proud—of how little he resembled young Johnny Dominetti, street gang scourge of the 1950's. He looked at Rogers and said, "We'll take the subway. I'll be okay."

The Iceman smiled.

Rogers always felt guilty about letting Mr. Demain go off on the subway that night, half potted and all. As he said to his wife later, he just knew, somehow, that Mr. Demain would never be seen again. . .

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And the gangland grapevine wondered at the Iceman's latest kill: some unknown bellhop found dead of cerebral hemorrhage in a subway car.

And in a town farther east all the gossip is about this new social lion, this Victor Brevis, who came out of nowhere a few winters back with the right manners, mien, and money. (A familiar face from Harvard, too, although no one can quite place the name.) He married a Schuyler girl (you should see the brooch he gave her) and owned a string of winning race horses until his father-in-law got him that job in the Off-Track Betting Administration.

And now he's been appointed Commissioner of the new State Lottery here, after nearly singlehandedly pushing the idea through the Legislature. If you drop by his office in the capital, you'll see a sign over his desk that reads: *IF YOU CAN'T BEAT 'EM, JOIN 'EM.*

No one is quite sure what it means.

"Q"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

I LOVE A MYSTERY: That is not editorializing, nor is it a superfluous statement of literary predilection. It *is* the theme of the Second International Congress of Crime Writers, which will be held in New York City March 14–17. And what an event this is!

The sponsors are a veritable "Who's Who" of the mystery: Eric Ambler, Isaac Asimov, the late James M. Cain, George Harmon Coxe, Mignon G. Eberhart, Stanley Ellin, Richard Lockridge, John D. MacDonald, Ross Macdonald, Hugh Pentecost, Ellery Queen, Georges Simenon, and Phyllis A. Whitney.

The idea of this huge meeting (325 participants from every part of the world, but mainly members of the Mystery Writers of America and the [British] Crime Writers Association) is, of course, to promote mystery fiction, to help make new friends for it, and for those involved with it to get together to discuss mutual problems and, with luck, solve them.

The first Congress was held in London in the fall of 1975 and received more attention from the various news media of the world than any reasonable person might have expected. This gathering should be no different.

Not only will most of the giants of detective fiction assemble to invent new perfect crimes and unusual murder methods and perfect alibis, but they will be joined by editors, police, booksellers, publishers, and stars from the entertainment world.

Countless events are planned, including a visit to the NYPD crime laboratory, a trip to a high-crime precinct station of the NYPD, a visit to the Medical Examiner's office and an opportunity to view an autopsy performed, a boat ride to Governor's Island and the U.S. Coast Guard facility, tours of Poe Cottage and the Police Academy, and talks by the Director of the FBI, the Police Commissioner of New York City, a private eye, a judge of the Criminal Court, a criminal lawyer, an arson expert, a former bank robber and "10 Most Want-

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ed" criminal, as well as panels of leading editors, publishers, agents, and mystery writers.

Two events will be the highlight of this second tribute to international crime. The first is the proclamation of "I Love a Mystery Week" by the mayors of cities throughout the United States, providing the recognition that this literary form deserves.

Second, and a lasting monument to the Congress, is the publication of *I, Witness: True Personal Encounters with Crime* (Times Books, $10.00), a collection of essays by 25 internationally famous mystery writers, edited by Edgar-winner (for *Hopscotch)* Brian Garfield.

Among the contributors to this huge and important anthology are Desmond Bagley, John Ball, Robert Bloch, Lawrence Block, and Christianna Brand, on through the alphabet to Aaron Marc Stein, Richard Martin Stern, Julian Symons, Lawrence Treat, Hillary Waugh, and Donald E. Westlake.

It exceeds 100,000 words and each article is a personal account of the writer's role (witness, detective, victim—yes, even criminal) in a real-life crime. Many of these involvements were the basis for books—Joe Gores' experiences as a private detective partially serving as the model for *Dead Skip,* for example, and Robert Bloch's study of the grisly Ed Gein, who became the Norman Bates of *Psycho.*

For further information about the Crime Writers Congress, write to the Mystery Writers of America, 105 East 19th Street, New York, N.Y. 10003.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Dashiell Hammett's *The Dain Curse,* as well as being a six-hour CBS-TV miniseries, is being released theatrically in Europe as *Private Eye.* The title role is being played by James Coburn —lean, yet at least saturnine— who is given the name Hamilton Nash. The setting, too, has been changed, to New York: lavish Long Island estates and the inner city temple of a sinister cult. An interesting cast includes Jean Simmons, Jason Miller, and Beatrice Straight. Director Michael Winner is also drastically altering *The Big Sleep,* adding violence as well as a London locale. Mitchum as Philip Marlowe, "the toughest private eye who ever wore a trench coat, slapped a dame, and split his knuckles on

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a jawbone" (so says the film), now runs afoul of the CID (John Mills) while trying to straighten out the troubles of General Sternwood (James Stewart) and his two willful daughters (Sarah Miles, Candy Clark). Said Lauren Bacall, who immortalized the Charlotte Sternwood role: "Why bother remaking *The Big Sleep?* Why redo something that's already perfect?" (The 1946 Bogart version was directed by Howard Hawks.)

Bobbie Ann Mason's *The Girl Sleuth,* published by the Feminist Press at $3.75, is a modern but affectionate look at such mystery-solvers as Nancy Drew, Judy Bolton, Cherry Ames, the Dana Girls, who despite their stories' mild racism and heavy middle-class messages provided young girl readers with early models of courage and independence, not to mention thrills besides.

Recently the Amherst Feminist Repertory Company staged in New York an original musical comedy, *Bonnie Keane, Girl Sleuth,* inspired by Ms. Drew's exploits and written by Eileen Stewart and Sarah Alleman. There are only women in the cast —the period is 1943 and the boys are all away at war—but this stricture does not slow down a warm, delightful pastiche of that traditional mystery form: Bonnie and her friends tackling a lost will, an alphabet code, a mother vanished long ago. Unlike the heroines she parodies, however, Bonnie does grow up, and at the end of the play begins a voyage of self-discovery. The songs are pleasant, but one called "Looking for Clues" ("check in the hollow tree/the dusty diary") is a superb evoking of all the incidents and quests of this literary school, an innocent world of lilac inns and whispering statues now seemingly as tamed and gone as its attic secrets.

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Ross Macdonald's first short story about Lew Archer was "Find the Woman" (*EQMM,* June 1946), though if you examine that historic issue, you'll find the story was signed by Kenneth Millar and the detective's name was Rogers. When Archer and the Macdonald pen-name became famous, the story was revised to become an Archer tale. Since then, eight more short stories about the famed private dick have been published, most re-

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cently 1965's "The Sleeping Dog." Although the Archer novels have gained Macdonald-Millar a major reputation, even outside the bounds of the mystery genre, the short stories until recently had only been collected in book form in a 1955 Bantam paperback original, *The Name Is Archer,* which included the first seven stories. Now all nine are available in a beautifully produced hardcover volume.

*** Ross Macdonald: *Lew Archer, Private Investigator,* The Mysterious Press, P.O. Box 334, East Station, Yonkers, N.Y. 10704, $10.00. The stories are densely plotted Archer novels-in-miniature with some fine lines of description and dialogue. There is generally more violence and traditional private-eye wisecracking than in recent novels in the series. Macdonald is less effective in the shorter form, however, perhaps because compression makes the plots seem too contrived and pat. The author's importance in the field gives the book a value beyond the intrinsic merit of the stories. Macdonald has contributed a fine new introduction to the stories, though he mistakenly says Archer's first incarnation was called Evans.

**** James McClure: *The Sunday Hangman,* Harper and Row, $8.95. The fifth novel about South African policemen Trompie Kramer and Mickey Zondi offers a perfect balance of pure detection and social observation, plus one of the most exciting action finales of recent months. Of special interest are the fascinating (and revolting) details of hanging techniques and some amusing observations on South Africa's first exposure, for good or ill, to television. McClure's rich style demands and deserves a slow and careful reading.

*** P. D. James: *Death of an Expert Witness,* Scribners, $8.95. A forensic science laboratory provides the background for Adam Dalgliesh's latest case, another well-written and well-cast pure detective novel, somewhat more conventional and less ambitious than the author's last two but still a solid job in the grand tradition.

*** Colin Dexter: *The Silent World of Nicholas Quinn,* St. Martin's, $7.95. Murder strikes Oxford's Foreign Examinations Syndicate, and Chief Inspector Morse confronts a convoluted puzzle whose working out, with multiple solutions and a striking ultimate clue, gives some of the analytical joy of a Queen or Carr novel.

*** Gregory Mcdonald: *Flynn,* Avon, $1.95. An Edgar winner for his first two novels, Mcdonald tries for the hat trick. "Reluctant" Flynn, the mysterious do-gooder-cop-spy of *Confess, Fletch,* returns to investigate the mid-air explosion of a 707. The story has enough wit, style, and ingenuity to counterbalance its general unbelievability.

*** Charles Merrill Smith: *Rev-*

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erend Randollph and the Avenging Angel, Putnam, $7.95. In his second case, former Ram quarterback C. P. Randollph, surely the most irreverent of clergyman-sleuths, is still interim pastor of Chicago's wealthy Church of the Good Shepherd. Smith, himself a Methodist minister and author of the memorable *How To Become a Bishop Without Being Religious,* is always an entertaining writer. The continuing characters come to life, but unfortunately the suspects don't. As in the Rabbi Small novels of Harry Kemelman, the religious ponderings are at least as important (and sometimes more interesting) than the plot.

*** Michael Gilbert: *Petrella at Q,* Harper and Row, $8.95. Though called a novel on the dust jacket, this is a collection of eleven short stories, all from *EQMM,* and a novelet called "The Cleaners" that will be new to this magazine's readers. Gilbert's quietly effective police-routine stories offer solutions with a ring of truth rather than of spectacular invention.

*** Richard Lockridge: *The Tenth Life,* Lippincott, $8.95. The latest M. L. Heimrich novel concerns a murdered veterinarian and the world of show-cat breeding. Though reflecting the author's interest in cats, the novel also has a memorable dog character. The usual neat, professional job, with an interesting murderer, as Lockridge often provides.

*** Dean R. Koontz: *The Vision,* Putnam, $8.95. As in his recent novel *The Face of Fear* (as by Brian Coffey), Koontz has a crime-investigating clairvoyant as main character, but here there is more exploration of the nature of the gift and the problems of psychics. Always a careful and conscientious craftsman, Koontz knows all the techniques for creating and sustaining suspense. Even the reader who is conscious of being manipulated will not be able to stop turning the pages.

** Diane K. Shah: *The Mackin Cover,* Dodd Mead, $7.95. Football mysteries that climax at the Super Bowl are not so rare these days. This one concerns a missing quarterback and an investigative reporter, narrator Lindsie Hollis, who is determined to find him. Nicely written with a strong heroine, but some questionable motivation and a somewhat limp conclusion. The football is reasonably knowledgeable, though there is no position called "lineback."

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"Q"

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(See reviews on page 60)

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DETECTIVERSE

MYSTERY DIET

by MAE Z. SCANLAN

Monday I, for my cuisine,
Like to munch on Ellery Queen.
Tuesday, let me tell you, pardner,
That's the day I gobble Gardner.
Wednesday to the den I go
To redigest the tales of Poe.
Thursday (here my eyes grow misty)
I enjoy the taste of Christie.
Friday, nibbling on a filbert,
I consume some Michael Gilbert.
Saturday my favorite dish
Is usually Robert Fish.
Sunday, so as not to starve,
I devour Andrew Garve.

Every week I run the gamut—
Edward Hoch to Dashiell Hammett;
Margaret Millar, D. M. Disney,
Ellin (he's a good one, isn't he?);
Ross Macdonald, Lawrence Treat,
Bill Pronzini—they're my meat;
Ed McBain is surely tops—
How I love his precinct cops;
Woolrich is a special meal,
If anyone will please you, he'll.
What a way to spend one's time,
Eating up the cream of crime.
Honestly you ought to try it
For a week—my mystery diet.

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a *NEW* detective story by

JACK RITCHIE

Jack Ritchie has an interesting plot-technique. Other detective writers have used it, but somehow, in a way that can't really be explained, Mr. Ritchie has made the technique his own. Try this example for size: join Henry Turnbuckle, a detective on the Milwaukee police force, visiting his brother-in-law Clarence, who is sheriff of Green River County—and smile to your heart's content . . .

THE SCHOOL BUS CAPER

by JACK RITCHIE

I pondered. "Who would want to steal a school bus?"

"Probably some high-school kids," Clarence said. "They sneaked a few beers and then thought it would be fun to take the bus for a ride. More than likely we'll find it parked up some side road when daylight comes."

He turned the patrol car headlights into a long sparsely graveled driveway that wound uphill for a quarter of a mile and ended in front of a farmhouse, a barn, and a cluster of sheds.

It was a few minutes after seven in the morning and still almost a half an hour before official sunrise. The temperature hovered at ten above zero and the wind-chill factor must have been fifteen below.

"How does it happen that the school bus was parked up here in the first place?" I asked.

"Jackson is a school-bus driver, Henry. In the country the drivers usually take their buses home with them at night. Saves a trip all the way into town in the morning to pick them up for their routes. Jackson is a widower and retired farmer. He rents out his fields and barn to neighbors. He drives the school bus for extra cash or maybe just to feel useful."

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Clarence parked under the bluish yard light. A face had been watching at the lighted kitchen window of the farmhouse and the back door opened as we reached the stoop.

A tall weathered man in his sixties welcomed us in. "I thought I'd call on you personal instead of to headquarters in Gordonville seeing as how you live just down the road."

Clarence is the sheriff of Green River County. He introduced me. "This is my brother-in-law, Henry Turnbuckle. He's spending the Christmas holidays with me and my wife. Henry's a detective on the Milwaukee police force."

I nodded modestly. "I do the best I can."

Jackson's phone call to Clarence had come ten minutes earlier while we were finishing breakfast and I had decided to come along to see how Clarence and the sheriff's department handled these matters.

"Tell me what happened, Albert," Clarence said.

"Well, I just walked outside this morning and there it wasn't. The bus, I mean. Number 103."

"What is the license number, Albert?"

Jackson rubbed his jaw. "Darn if I remember."

I pointed to a ring of keys on the kitchen table. "If those are the bus keys, the tag on the chain ought to give us the license number."

It did and Clarence put the information in his notebook. "I don't suppose you heard or saw the bus being stolen?"

"I didn't see or hear a thing. My guess is that whoever took the bus just got inside and released the brake. That would get it rolling down the driveway all the way to the highway and he could get it started down there and I wouldn't hear the motor." He turned to me. "Number 103 sometimes gives me trouble trying to get it started on cold mornings, so I park it up here and point it down the driveway. All I have to do is release the emergency brake, put her in neutral, and let her roll. Halfway down the hill I throw out the clutch and she starts. Never failed yet."

"Mr. Jackson," I said, "did you keep the school bus locked?"

"Well, no. I guess maybe I should have, but I never thought anybody would steal her."

I indicated the ignition keys. "Since you still have the keys, how do you suppose the culprit managed to start the motor once he got the bus down the hill?"

"He probably crossed the ignition wires," Clarence said. "Did

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you phone the bus company, Albert?"

Jackson nodded. "They sent out another driver and a bus to take over my route this morning."

Clarence pocketed his notebook. "We'll radio out the word, Albert. Probably your bus will turn up somewhere as soon as it gets light."

Jackson felt the same way. "I'm not particularly worried. I mean, who would steal a school bus except some kids? I just hope they don't bang it up any."

Clarence and I drove on to Gordonville, the county seat, where the sheriff's department headquarters is located. Clarence supervises some twenty deputies and his department represents the largest single law-enforcement agency in Green River County.

At fifteen minutes after nine o'clock we received word that the bank at Ferrill had been robbed.

Clarence got off his chair. "Well, Henry, we don't get many of those. We might as well go over there and see for ourselves."

We drove 15 miles to Ferrill and parked among the sheriff's two patrol cars and a Ferrill squad car.

Inside of the bank building one of Clarence's deputies gave us the basic information.

"The bank opens at nine. One of the first people to come in was a man with a full black beard and it was pretty obvious to the bank employees that it was false. He was about medium height and medium weight and he pointed a gun. He got away with about twenty-five thousand dollars.

"A couple of customers in the café across the street noticed a bearded man carrying a satchel running out of the bank and they saw him hop into a late-model blue and white sedan. They didn't get the entire license number, but one of them remembers that the last three digits were consecutive—123."

Clarence remained long enough to make certain his department had everything under control and then we drove back to headquarters.

A deputy was waiting for us. "We found the stolen school bus." He indicated a young woman sitting on one of the wooden benches. "She was driving it about four miles west of town. She claims she's a school-bus driver and that the bus is hers."

Clarence approached the woman. "What is your name, please?"

She seemed to be controlling her temper with difficulty. "Mrs. Rebecca McCullen."

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"And you claim you're a school-bus driver?"

"Damn right."

"Are you aware that you were driving a stolen bus?"

"Baloney. It's my bus. Number 88. When you drive the same bus for three years, you get to know it even if everybody else thinks they all look alike."

We went outside to the school bus parked in the lot behind headquarters. The black number 88 was painted on both sides of the bus.

I rubbed my finger over the numbers. "There's a thorough coating of road dirt over these numbers, which indicates they have not been tampered with lately." I spoke to Mrs. McCullen. "Are those your license plates on the bus?"

She shrugged. "Who remembers license numbers? But it's my bus."

"Mrs. McCullen," I said, "would you please check the plastic tag on your key chain and compare it to the license plates on your bus."

She made the comparison and frowned. "They don't match. They're different numbers. But it's still my bus, license plates or not."

I agreed. "I believe you, madam. For some insidious reason the license plates from the stolen school bus were transferred to your vehicle. Where do you keep this bus when you're not driving it?"

"On my husband's farm. Right next to the house."

"Do you know an Albert Jackson?" I asked. "He's the driver of the bus reported stolen."

She considered the name. "It doesn't ring a bell. But I might know him by sight. If he's a school-bus driver I could have seen him at one of the schools in town or maybe at the bus yard where we get our gas and servicing."

"One more question," I said. "Do you own a dog?"

"No. My husband's allergic to them."

Clarence rubbed his chin. "Well, Mrs. McCullen, I guess for the time being you might just as well go home. We'll call you if we need you again."

When Clarence and I returned to his office, there was more information concerning the Ferrill bank robbery.

The blue and white getaway car had been found just four blocks from the bank. Inside, on the front seat, the police discovered a false beard. A check of the dealer license plates on the car indi-

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cated that it had come from the Hawkins Used Car Lot in Ferrill. According to Hawkins, the bearded man had approached him at 8:30 that morning and looked over the cars in his lot. He had asked to test-drive the blue and white sedan around the block. Hawkins had said okay and that was the last he saw of the man or the car until the police found it.

Clarence reconstructed the robbery. "Our man got into the dealer's car, drove to the bank, robbed it, then drove a few blocks more around the corner, and abandoned the car. Probably he had another vehicle waiting at that point."

After lunch we received the information that Jackson's bus—with the McCullen license plates on it—had been found parked up a dirt road in a place called Murdock's Woods.

Clarence frowned thoughtfully. "That's less than half a mile from Jackson's farm."

We went to his patrol car and took the highway out of town.

I watched the cold landscape as Clarence drove. "There is the matter of the dogs," I said.

"What dogs?"

"The dogs that weren't there. If you sneak into a farmer's yard with the intention of stealing his school bus or switching license plates, what are you most likely to encounter?"

"I don't know. What am I most likely to encounter?"

"A barking dog who would raise the alarm."

"But Jackson doesn't have a dog. Neither does Mrs. McCullen."

"Exactly. That is my point. I'll wager that ninety-eight percent or more of all farms have at least one dog in residence."

Clarence nodded. "Jackson's dog was Old Brownie, but he died of old age about a month ago. Albert just hasn't had the heart to replace him yet."

I smiled. "And who would know that Albert Jackson no longer has a dog on his premises?"

"Neighbors, I suppose."

I agreed. "It's my belief that whoever stole Jackson's bus brought it back almost to the point where he stole it because he still faced the prospect of having to *walk* home. And considering that it is extremely cold today, I would put that walking distance at under a half a mile from Murdock's Woods."

Clarence cogitated. "The nearest teenager that would fit is Lance Meuhlendorfer. He lives between Murdock's Woods and Jackson's farm."

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I nodded. "It's obvious that this Meuhlendorfer lad would know that Jackson no longer has a dog, but how did he know that the McCullen farm didn't have one either? There is about twenty miles between the two, but there must be some common bond. Some common denominator."

As we approached Murdock's Woods, Clarence slowed the patrol car and turned into a dirt road. Fifty feet ahead we found another patrol car parked behind a yellow school bus.

A waiting trooper put out his cigarette and approached. "We tried for fingerprints, but there was nothing on the steering wheel. Whoever took the bus probably wore gloves or mittens. Not that it matters too much. We can't go to the high school and ask eight hundred boys to give us their fingerprints for comparison." He led us to the open bus door. "The ignition wires are all screwed up. I radioed in and the bus company is sending up somebody to patch things up." He looked past us. "There he is now."

A panel truck pulled up behind our car and parked. A medium-sized man in a plaid jacket got out, bringing a toolbox with him.

Clarence nodded. "Afternoon, Jim."

The man returned the nod and moved on to the school bus. We watched him crouch under the hood and shake his head. "Somebody sure made a mess of this."

Clarence and I went back to our patrol car and got in.

"That's Jim Meuhlendorfer," Clarence said.

It took me a moment to grasp the significance of the name. "You mean he's the father of this Lance Meuhlendorfer?"

Clarence nodded again. "Jim is the mechanic over at the bus yard garage."

I closed my eyes.

But, of course. Now everything fell into place. "Clarence, the Meuhlendorfer boy might have known that Jackson did not have a dog, but how did he know that Mrs. McCullen didn't?"

"I don't know, Henry."

"But on the other hand, *Jim* Meuhlendorfer could easily have learned that Mrs. McCullen didn't have a dog. After all, he worked for the bus company, and surely at some time or another when she brought in her bus for servicing or gassing, he could have fallen into conversation with her and learned about her husband's allergy to dogs. Perhaps he even *deliberately* sought out

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a country bus driver who did not own a dog."

"Henry, I don't see what you're getting at? Do you mean that Jim Meuhlendorfer stole the school bus? Not his son?"

"Precisely."

"Now, Henry, why would a grown man steal a school bus?"

I smiled. "Clarence, just let us suppose the senior Meuhlendorfer sneaked across the field to Jackson's place last night and stole the school bus. And then suppose he drove this bus some twenty miles to the McCullen farm where he knew there was no dog. And suppose he parked at the foot of their driveway, crept into their yard, and switched the license plates."

Clarence was dubious. "I've known Jim as a neighbor for a long time and he never struck me as being a practical joker."

"Ah," I said wisely, "but it was not a practical joke. In fact, it was no joke at all. After he switched the license plates he drove on to Ferrill. When he got there, he parked the school bus on a side street. He walked about a bit until eight thirty and then stopped at Hawkins' Used Car Lot and borrowed the blue and white sedan. He drove to the bank, committed his robbery, and then drove the car to the point where he had left the school bus. There he simply switched vehicles and drove back to Murdock's Woods. He parked the bus and walked home, twenty-five thousand dollars richer."

Clarence seemed pained. "Henry, don't you think it's just a little wild to use a school bus for a getaway car?"

"On the contrary, Clarence. That is the most brilliant aspect of this operation. After the bank was robbed, the alarm would of course be sent out immediately, but what patrol-car deputy would so much as glance twice at the driver of a school bus?"

Clarence stared at the parked school bus ahead. "Why did Jim go through the whole routine of switching the license plates? Wouldn't just stealing the McCullen plates and putting them on his own bus have been enough? Why put Jackson's plates on the McCullen bus?"

"Because while people do not as a general rule remember their license-plate number—particularly on school buses, I would imagine—they would be likely to notice something wrong if there is no license plate at all on their vehicle. If Mrs. McCullen herself did not notice the absence when she got into her bus for her morning rounds, surely one of the children she picked up would have and mentioned it to her. In which case she would probably

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have notified the sheriff immediately and the department would have an eye out for her license-plate number. But our bank robber certainly didn't want that. He needed time, and switching the plates gave that to him. By the time the police straightened out that particular problem, he would have completed his robbery and been home safe."

Clarence was still not a believer. "Henry, you saw how messed up those wires were. Jim is an expert mechanic. If he were going to cross wires, he would know exactly what to do. It would be a neat job."

"Clarence, we are dealing with a clever man here. If he had left a neat job, we might immediately suspect someone who knew a great deal about school buses and their ignition systems. So he cunningly made us think that it was the work of an amateur."

Clarence picked up his radio microphone, made a call to headquarters, and asked that someone be sent to the bus-company garage to determine if Jim Meuhlendorfer had been at work at the time the bank in Ferrill was being robbed.

We received our answer in ten minutes. According to Jim Meuhlendorfer's boss, Meuhlendorfer had punched in at the garage at eight o'clock, as usual, and he had been there until he was sent out to repair the ignition wires on Jackson's bus a half hour ago.

I cleared my throat. "These things are tricky, you know. Meuhlendorfer could have arranged a dummy and shoved it under some school bus needing transmission work. These things have happened before. Anyone glancing into the garage would have seen the dummy and assumed it was Meuhlendorfer himself. When he returned from his crime, he could have changed places with the dummy and no one would be the wiser."

"I'll be sure to check that out sometime tomorrow, Henry," Clarence said. He started the patrol car and carefully backed around Meuhlendorfer's panel truck and onto the highway.

He turned south. "We might as well drop in at Jackson's place and tell him we found his bus."

Clarence drove past his own house set on an acre of land beside the road, past the Meuhlendorfer home, also of ranch-style construction, and turned into Jackson's long driveway.

I closed my eyes.

"Henry," Clarence said, "you're closing your eyes again."

"I know," I said and opened them. "I see it all so clearly now.

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How could I have missed it in the first place?"

"Missed what?"

"Clarence, who was the person *closest* to Jackson's bus?"

"One of the Meuhlendorfers?"

"No, Clarence. The person nearest to Jackson's bus was Jackson *himself*." I smiled. "It was Jackson all the time. During the darkness of last night he got into his own bus and drove to the McCullen farm and switched license plates."

"How did he know that the McCullens did not have a dog?"

"Clarence, when you are planning an elaborate bank robbery, you make it your *business* to find out which one of the other bus drivers doesn't have a dog. And after he switched the license plates he drove to Murdock's Woods, where he parked the bus. After which he walked back to his farmhouse and reported his bus had been stolen. When you and I left him, he simply walked back to Murdock's Woods, picked up the bus, drove to Ferrill, and we know the rest of the whole sordid story."

I chuckled slightly. "But like all clever criminals he made at least one mistake. In this case, the ignition keys."

"I don't follow you, Henry."

"When we entered Jackson's house this morning, the ignition keys for the bus lay in plain sight on the kitchen table. When I wondered how the bus thief could have started the vehicle without the keys, Jackson realized he had made a mistake. He should have hidden the keys and claimed that he had accidentally left them in the bus overnight. While he was thinking desperately for some explanation you inadvertently aided him by suggesting that the thief probably crossed the ignition wires. That saved Jackson for the moment.

"But he realized that *after* he committed his robbery and abandoned the bus in Murdock's Woods, he would have to make it *appear* as though the thief had truly crossed the wires. However while Jackson is a bus driver, he is not a mechanic. He did not *know* which of the wires to cross, so he simply created anarchy under the hood in the hope that an amateur would be blamed."

Clarence pulled the car into Jackson's farmyard. "We have to consider the description of the bank robber, Henry."

"What description? The false beard hid his face."

"I wasn't thinking of the beard, Henry. The bank robber was described as of medium height and medium build. Jackson is rail-thin and six foot three."

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"Oh," I said.

We gave Jackson a lift to Murdock's Woods and then continued on to Gordonville.

Clarence stopped the patrol car at the local high school. "Want to come in?"

"No," I said. "Clarence, you are barking up the wrong tree. This is definitely not a kid caper."

Clarence came back in 25 minutes. "Well, that takes care of that. I had a private fatherly talk with Lance and he decided to admit the whole thing. It's usually that way with teenagers, Henry. They can't stand the pressure of having to lie more than ten minutes at a time."

I frowned fiercely. "You mean this mere lad stole Jackson's bus, went joy riding, and switched the license plates? How did he know the McCullens didn't have a dog?"

"There were two boys in on this, Henry. Lance Meuhlendorfer and Eddie Frantz. They're buddies here in high school and Eddie lives on a farm near to the McCullens. Last night Eddie stayed over at Lance's house. They sneaked some beer out of the family refrigerator and took them up to Lance's room. After they finished a few bottles they got the idea for the whole thing. They didn't mean any real harm, they just wanted to sit back and watch the fun. They'll both probably get probation."

Clarence checked out of headquarters at five o'clock and we began the drive back to his home.

After a while I smiled.

"Henry, why are you smiling?"

"Clarence, how old are the Meuhlendorfer and the Frantz boys?"

"They're both nearly eighteen."

"Ah, and would one, or both of them, by any *remote* chance be of *medium* height and *medium* build?"

"No," Clarence said. "They're well over six feet and weigh close to two-fifty. They're linemen on the football team."

I watched the passing countryside. It was really depressing at this time of year, if you wanted to be honest about it.

When we reached Clarence's house I took off my overcoat and sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs.

My sister Madge appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Have a nice day?"

I sighed. "Madge, do you have any sherry in the house?"

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"I'm afraid not, Henry. How about a beer?"

Clarence looked at me. "Sherry?"

Madge nodded. "Whenever Henry is feeling particularly depressed or frustrated, he usually has some sherry."

"Oh," Clarence said, "Do you drink much sherry, Henry?"

Was he being sarcastic?

Clarence smiled. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Henry. I'll drive back to town and get you a bottle of sherry. No trouble at all. I have to get some more beer anyway."

While he was gone, I paged glumly through a family photo album. I paused at a faded snapshot of a man and a woman. The man sported a full beard. He was probably one of Clarence's grandparents.

I studied him and then rubbed my jaw. I went to the Gordonville area phone book and turned to the yellow pages. I found there was only one liquor store listed and I dialed the number. I left the proprietor a message that when Clarence arrived there, he should phone me immediately.

The return call came in three minutes.

"Clarence," I said, "do you remember that the bank employees in Ferrill *all* agreed that the beard worn by the bank robber was obviously false?"

"Yes, Henry."

"Well, if I were a used-car dealer and a stranger wearing an obviously false beard came to me and asked to take out one of my best cars on a solo run, would I really let him do it? At the very least, wouldn't I go along as a passenger? But Hawkins didn't. You don't suppose that this particular incident never really occurred at all?"

Clarence returned home more than an hour and a half later.

He sighed. "Hawkins is medium height and medium weight and we found the twenty-five thousand dollars in the trunk of an Edsel he had on his lot." He looked at the wrapped bottle in his hands. "Here's your sherry, Henry."

I smiled. "Thank you, but I don't think I'll need any now."

Clarence, however, had two thoughtful glasses of sherry before we sat down to dinner.

"Q"

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The essential ingredient of a con game is not always where the ingredient first appears . . .

SUFFICIENT UNTO THE DAY

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

The girl at the receptionist's desk would have made a good model. At least she had the long slim lines and bony facial structure. Also the faintly aloof air.

"Yes?"

"Would you be so kind," the Major said, "as to tell Mr. Porterfield that Major McDonlevy and Mr. James are here to see him?"

The girl's expression didn't change. "Do you have an appointment?"

"Not exactly," the Major said, "but I believe he is expecting us."

"I'll see," the girl said. She rose langorously and went back through the door to the inner office, closing it behind her.

The Major looked around and rubbed his hands together briskly. "Very impressive," he said, "wouldn't you say?"

"The girl?"

"No, I meant the office." He smiled suddenly. He was a short man—barely five foot five—with a barrel chest, square ruddy face neatly bisected by a full gray mustache, and a bristle of close-cropped hair the same iron-gray color. Only his eyes didn't fit the military image. They were very blue and ingenuous—most of the time. "Although I must admit the girl does have her points as well. Nevertheless, I think you'll find that in this business it pays to keep your mind on the essentials."

"I'll try," I said, "but at the moment it seems to me that the really essential thing would be to get some money coming in."

"Of course," the Major said. "But then to make money is why we're here. I showed you the ad, didn't I?"

I nodded. The Major had met Porterfield earlier that week as a result of an ad that Porterfield had been running in the local pa-

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pers offering investors an opportunity to double their money in 30 days. Even if we'd had money to invest, it still would have been too good to be true and I said as much now.

"Of course, my boy," the Major said, "but that's precisely what makes it so interesting." He broke off as the inner door opened. "Ah," he said, "and now unless I'm mistaken here's the young lady come back to tell us Mr. Porterfield will see us." He smiled beamingly at the girl. She looked expressionlessly back.

"You can go right in," she said.

Porterfield was a tall heavy-set man in his mid-to-late-fifties with a tanned, craggy face and tight curly hair just beginning to go gray. He went well with the office, which was large, carpeted, and paneled in dark expensive-looking oak. The back wall was lined with bookshelves except for the far right corner where space had been left for a door to the outside corridor. Porterfield rose easily now as the Major and I came in.

"Ah, Mr. McDonlevy," he said. "Good to see you again."

"Actually," the Major said, advancing into the room, "it's *Major* McDonlevy. Major Henry T. McDonlevy to be precise, U.S. Army—and, if I may say so myself, the world's greatest adjutant until some bureaucratic mixup in Washington forced my retirement. Not that it matters any more, but I do like to have these things straight."

"Yes, of course," Porterfield said. He seemed slightly taken aback, but the Major went on imperviously.

"I was just telling Tom here," he said, sitting down and crossing his short legs, "how much I admired your office. Makes me almost wish I wasn't such a rolling stone. Still," he added almost regretfully, "I suppose there are advantages."

"There are advantages to everything, Major," Porterfield said, back in charge of himself and again exuding heartiness. "It's just a matter of availing yourself of them."

The Major looked at him curiously. "You know," he said, "that was just the point I was going to make to Tom."

"Good," Porterfield said. "That means we see eye to eye. I take it that it also means you've decided to come in with us."

The Major cleared his throat. "I wouldn't say 'decided,'" he said. "I try to guide my life by the Good Book and where money is concerned I find it pays to be 'slow of speech, and of a slow tongue' until all the facts are in. Besides, I'd like Tom here to hear the proposition as well."

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"Of course," Porterfield said. He paused, then rose as a light rap sounded on the outer door. "That must be Barnes now," he said. "I took the liberty of calling him when the girl told me you were here. He's the one you want to talk to anyway, because it's really more his project than anybody else's." He opened the door to admit a tall sallow-complexioned man. "Ah, Carl," Porterfield said, "you're just in time. This is Major McDonlevy—the man I told you about—and his associate, Mr.—ah?"

"James," I said. "Tom James."

Barnes gave me a limp hand, nodded distantly, then sat down across from the Major. "Arthur tells me you're interested in our little project."

"Shall we say I'm interested in considering it," the Major said. "I won't know whether I'm really interested until I know more about it."

"Fair enough," Barnes said. He was older than Porterfield and angular where the younger man was inclined to paunch. "What's Arthur told you so far, Major?"

"Only that you have what promises to be a highly profitable land speculation."

"Hardly a speculation, Major," Barnes said. "Or a promise. A fact. I travel a lot in my work, checking out potential factory sites primarily for eventual purchase or lease. It takes me to a lot of interesting places and into a lot of interesting records. That's only by way of background. The important thing is that in tracing down a title recently I came upon a situation of, shall we say, more than passing interest.

"It seems that about fifteen years ago a New York businessman named Elton Peters bought a tract of marshland in northern Indiana. The land was considered worthless and maybe it was. Peters' idea, however, was to turn it into a private sporting club and duck blind which he and his friends could use any time they wanted. Before he could bring it off, though, he was killed in one of those freak accidents the National Rifle Association says can't happen to experienced hunters but somehow seem to anyway.

"Be that as it may, his idea died with him. I imagine the attorney for his estate made some effort to sell the land, but found no takers for what was little better than a swamp and ended up writing the whole thing off as a dead loss. Loss or no, though, title passed to Peters' sole heir, a nephew, who still owns it.

"He wasn't hard to track down. He'd moved several times, but

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there's always a neighbor who remembers or a cousin who's kept in touch and one thing just leads to another. In any case, he lives in New Jersey and he thinks the possibility of finally getting some money out of 'Uncle's swamp' is the greatest joke in the world. What he doesn't know is that three years ago the river that fed the marsh shifted its course and as a result his 'swamp' is dry as a bone and worth at least four or five times what he thinks it is."

The Major shifted in his chair. "By George," he said, "I see what you mean about its not being speculation. Even if the deal falls through, all you stand to lose is your time."

"That's right," Barnes said. "At the worst we get our money back less maybe a few hundred for expenses. At the best, we make a four- or five-hundred percent profit—again less maybe a few hundred for expenses."

The Major smiled broadly. "Well," he said, "under the circumstances I don't see how I could possibly refuse. How much do you need?"

"$30,000," Barnes said.

"Thirty—"

"That's the total amount, Major," Porterfield put in smoothly. "Obviously no one of us has that kind of capital—otherwise why would we need partners?"

"Of course," the Major said. He seemed relieved.

"How much *can* you put up, Major?" Barnes said.

The Major shifted under his gaze. "Well," he said. He looked over at me. "Well, I think we could manage $5000. Yes, definitely, $5000."

"And that's all?" Barnes said. "Porterfield and I are putting up $10,000 each. We expected you'd be able at least to match that."

"Well, obviously I would if I could," the Major said. "Maximize the profits and all that. But I'm afraid $5000 is the most we could go."

Barnes shook his head. "I'm sorry, Major," he said.

"Oh, come now," the Major said. "What difference does it make how much each of us invests, since naturally we take our profits only in the same proportion."

Barnes continued to shake his head. "It's not that simple," he said. "I have another man on the string who will have the full $10,000 by the middle of next week. He won't settle for half. And there's no reason I should have to, because the only reason we

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considered you is that we thought you'd have the money now, and obviously the sooner we act the better." He shrugged. "A bird in the hand's always worth two in the bush, but all you can offer really is half a bird."

"Maybe the Major knows someone who'd be willing to take the second half," Porterfield said.

Now it was the Major's turn to shake his head. "I'm afraid my only other contact in town is the desk clerk at my hotel and I really doubt he'd have that much money even if he were the type to put it up."

"I doubt it too," Barnes said. "I'm sorry, Major, but you can see my position."

"I feel bad about this," Porterfield said. "I really should have—" He broke off as the phone behind him rang. With a muttered "excuse me" he swung around to pick it up. "I thought I said I didn't want to be disturbed," he said into the receiver . . . "I see . . . No, I'd better talk to him." He looked over at the three of us and made an apologetic face, then spoke back into the receiver: "Yes, O'Connor? . . .It's here *now*? . . . No, no problem . . . Yes, of course. This afternoon . . . Yes, I understand."

He put the phone back down and sat silently for a moment, biting his lip. Barnes looked at him curiously. "Something wrong, Arthur?" he said.

Porterfield pulled himself back together with a start. "No," he said. He managed a smile. "Nothing I can't work out anyway."

"Good," Barnes said. He rose and turned to the Major. "I don't think there's really anything more to discuss," he said. "It's just one of those things. Too bad."

The Major nodded slowly. "I suppose," he said. "You will keep us in mind, though, in case this other man can't come up with the money either?"

Barnes smiled wryly. "It's hardly likely," he said. "But if it makes you feel better, sure." He nodded to Porterfield. "I'll be talking to you later, Arthur," he said and went out the same door he had come in by.

There was a short strained silence. Then the Major started to rise. Porterfield waved him back. "Don't be in such a hurry, Major," he said. "Maybe we can work something out yet."

"How so?" the Major said. "You heard the man. He won't give."

"No," Porterfield said. "But maybe I will. How would you like to buy half of my share? Even-steven. For $5000, cash on the line."

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The Major looked at him thoughtfully. "I wouldn't mind that at all," he said. "The question is, though, why would you want to sell?"

"And the answer is I wouldn't if I had any choice. The fact is, though, that not too long ago I took a big plunge. Without going into details, what I've done essentially is extend the franchising concept to the small manufacturing area. It's a wide-open field, and in the long run it will pay off handsomely. For the short run—well, all new businesses need lots of capital and frankly I was stretched pretty thin even before Barnes came up with his proposition. But—well, four-hundred percent profit. There was just no way I could turn that down."

"No," the Major said, "of course not."

"Anyway," Porterfield said, "to come up with the money I did what I had to. Nothing desperate, of course. I didn't embezzle or steal. But I did cut a few corners here and there."

"Like what?" I said.

"Well, for one thing I found I could buy industrial diamonds—which the franchises use in their cutting tools—for a quarter the price I'd pay here if I bought in Holland. So I arranged through a mutual friend for an airlines crewman to pick them up for me whenever he made a run to Amsterdam. The problem is he's here now—a good two weeks before I expected him. And since the deal is strictly cash and carry, I either pay up and take delivery this afternoon before his return flight or I lose the shipment, which I can't afford because it would mean reneging on the contract and forfeiting at least some of the franchises."

"I see," the Major said. He looked even more thoughtful. "I hate to profit by another man's misfortune," he said, "but on the other hand—"

"On the other hand," Porterfield finished for him, "you're a fool if you pass up the opportunity. Don't worry about it. In your place I'd do the same thing. The important thing is, are you willing to do it? And how fast can you put your hands on your money? Because there isn't much time to spare."

"Well," the Major said slowly, "I'd have to go to the bank—half an hour, say. Forty-five minutes at the most."

Porterfield bit his lip again. "That's cutting it pretty close," he said. "To be on the safe side, rather than come back here, you'd better take the money directly out to the airport. I'd go with you but I have to stay here in case O'Connor calls back."

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"Of course," the Major said. "May I ask how we will recognize him?"

"No problem," Porterfield said. He rose and went to his coat closet to get out a brown-leather attaché case. "You carry the money in this," he said. "Then when you get to the airport, go to the newsstand in the international terminal, pick up a newspaper, and stand in front pretending to read it with the case on the floor beside you. O'Connor will contact you there. He'll have an identical case which he'll set down beside yours while he asks the dealer for an out-of-town paper—the *Louisville Courier Journal*. That's your cue to pick up his case and casually stroll off, leaving him yours with the money."

He paused as I frowned. "Something the matter, Mr. James?" he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Why all the rigamarole?"

Porterfield smiled self-consciously. "I suppose it does sound a little cloak-and-daggerish," he said, "but better that than risking some alert customs agent spotting an out-and-out exchange."

"Customs agent! You mean these diamonds are being smuggled in?"

"Of course," Porterfield said. "I thought you realized that."

"No," I said, "I didn't."

The Major cleared his throat. "Ah," he said, "I think perhaps I did. Not that it makes any difference, though. In for a penny, in for a pound, eh?"

"That's the spirit, Major," Porterfield said. He held out the briefcase. The Major took it.

Later as we were riding down in the elevator, I said, "I hope you know what you're doing."

The Major smiled. "I haven't let you down yet, my boy, have I?"

"No," I admitted. "But isn't there something in that Good Book that you're so fond of quoting about there always being a first time?"

He looked at me blankly. "Not that I'm aware of," he said.

It was fairly crowded at the airport, but even so I had little difficulty staking out a spot near the newsstand to wait—or recognizing O'Connor when he appeared. He was a small sharp-faced man wearing a dark double-breasted jacket and matching trousers that suggested a uniform without quite being one. True to Porterfield's word he was carrying a brown attaché case that was at least a close match for mine if not exactly identical. He set it

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down about two feet from my own case while he browsed at the counter.

I hesitated even after I heard him ask for the Louisville paper, then, remembering the Major's "in for a penny, in for a pound," picked his case up and walked off. I didn't look back even when the commotion broke out behind me.

Porterfield's secretary wasn't at her desk when I got back to his office, but after a moment Porterfield himself came out to greet me. He looked at me curiously. "Didn't the Major come with you?" he said.

I shook my head. "No, he decided this was one of those times when two is a crowd."

"I see," Porterfield said. "I don't suppose it really matters. Everything went all right at the airport, didn't it?"

I shrugged. "I got this," I said and handed him the attaché case.

Porterfield looked at it lovingly. "Well, now," he said, taking a key from his pocket, "let's just check this out."

I'd discovered it was locked on the way back from the airport. Not that it mattered. What was or wasn't in it was his problem, not mine. Before he could open it, though, the door burst open and his secretary rushed in, flushed and out of breath.

"Thank goodness I got here in time," she said. "I was down in the lobby just now on my coffee break and I saw two men follow Mr. James in. I think they're police. At least I heard them talking and one said he'd call back to headquarters for instructions. I took a chance and followed him. Their car's got government plates."

"Oh, God!" Porterfield said. "They must have spotted O'Connor coming through customs and followed him to you and now from you to me." He turned away and shook his head as if lost. "I don't know what to say," he said. "It's all over."

"There has to be *something* we can do," the girl insisted. "All they know is Mr. James came in the building. They don't know he came *here*. Maybe if he got away—"

Porterfield shook his head again. "It wouldn't make any difference," he said. "O'Connor will give them my name to save himself. But," he added suddenly, turning back to me, "she's right about one thing. You can get away. O'Connor doesn't know you or your name. They're looking for me. And these." He rattled the briefcase. "You can slip out the back while they come in the front and be home free."

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"What about the money? Our $5000?"

"Cry over it later," Porterfield said. "It's gone. The important thing, though, is for you to get out of this now while you have the chance and put as much distance between yourself and this town as you can."

"Sure," I said. "You tell me how." I sat down and shrugged despondently. "I knew this was bound to happen. Sooner or later. But he always knew better. Not this time, though."

"James," Porterfield said, "you don't seem to understand—"

"No," I said, "*you* don't understand. That $5000 wasn't just investment money. It was every cent we had in the world." I smiled bitterly. "The Major figured we could live on bluff and prospects until Barnes's scheme paid off. But now"— I shrugged again—"we owe the hotel. Restaurant charges. Bar tabs. You name it. If we try to duck out, there'll be five kinds of warrants out for us before you can say boo. So I might as well take my chances here. Federal prisons are supposed to be better than State anyway."

Porterfield glanced at his secretary. "You know what to do," he said. "Stall them." He turned back to me. "I got you into this," he said, "I'll get you out of it. Come with me. For God's sake, man, don't just sit there. Come with me!"

I got up then and followed him into his office while the girl stayed behind. Porterfield kicked the door shut, then rummaged in a cabinet for his cash box, unlocked it, and counted out some bills.

"Here," he said.

It looked to be about $100. I shook my head. "What do you think I am?" I said. "Besides, that won't cover two days at the hotel. We owe for two weeks."

"I'm not paying your debts," Porterfield said. "I'm giving you headstart money. Now take it."

I still shook my head. Outside a loud pounding broke out on the door to the reception area. Porterfield hesitated, then scooped the rest of the bills from the box and thrust them into my pocket. "There," he said. "That's all the cash I have in the office. Over $700. Now get out of here and get moving!" He shoved me out the rear door and slammed it behind me.

I looked up and down the corridor. Seeing it empty in both directions, I cut across to the door marked STAIRS, walked down two flights, then rode the elevator the rest of the way. Nobody paid the slightest attention to me. . .

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The Major was waiting in the car half a block away. "Ah, my boy," he said as I got in, "how did it go?"

"Just the way you expected," I said. "The police showed up right on my heels. When I didn't panic, Porterfield did."

"I knew he would," the Major said. "He had no choice. But never mind that now. How much did you get?"

I took the bills from my pocket and counted them. "The son of a gun," I said. "There's only $500 here. He said there was seven."

The Major smiled. "I knew the man wasn't to be trusted," he said. "And hardly a major score in either event. But on the other hand, as the Good Book would have it, 'Sufficient unto the day.' Agreed?"

I nodded. "I don't suppose," I added after a moment, "there's any possibility there really were diamonds in that case."

"No more than there was real money in the one you carried out," the Major said. "I'm afraid, my boy, our friend Mr. Porterfield and his associates are working a modernized version of the old Country Send. And actually it's not a bad little scheme as schemes go. Only a saint could resist snapping at that bait. The only problem is what to do with your mark after he's hit.

"The ideal solution, of course, is not to be there when the sucker returns with his supposedly valuable purchase. Unfortunately, that option is open only to us rolling stones. If you have an expensive office to protect, the only feasible alternative, short of murder, is the old cops-at-the-door routine to panic the mark into running. And that, as I think even Porterfield will agree, has certain disadvantages—although for the moment at least I'm sure he feels $500 a small price to pay for the $5000 he expects to receive."

"Sure," I said. "The only thing I don't understand, though, is why O'Connor didn't call him from the airport to warn him our briefcase was only full of cut paper."

The Major cleared his throat. "That, my boy, is why I wasn't able to accompany you. After you left the newsstand I—shall we say inadvertently?—collided with O'Connor. It created quite a disturbance then and an even larger one a few moments later when I discovered my wallet was missing." His blue eyes twinkled ingenuously. "I'm afraid O'Connor has been tied up ever since explaining to the police how it happened to get into his pocket. And now if you don't mind, to avoid further complications I suggest we do what Porterfield couldn't—take the money and run."

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a *NEW* short story by

STEPHEN WASYLYK

Homicide and humor—an irresistible combination when the emulsion is achieved, when the emulsifying process is in the hands of a writer with a true comic touch. This story will lighten your day or brighten your evening, especially if you are a TV addict . . . Now read about a case of multiple murder—"This is the work of a madman!"—with a chuckle on every page . . .

THE KROWTEN CORNERS CRIME WAVE

by *STEPHEN WASYLYK*

When Denny Klinger, the cashier, reported for work that morning, he noticed that the stack of cartons in the storeroom at the rear of the small supermarket had collapsed. He immediately set to work to right them before Mr. Whiffle arrived.

If Denny had known Mr. Whiffle's dead body was under the tumbled boxes, he probably wouldn't have bothered. He had never liked Mr. Whiffle.

Hugh Tint, the tall thin sheriff, blinked behind his heavy spectacles. "First fatal accident in Krowten Corners that I can remember. This is a very average town with very average people who do very average work with no risk involved."

His deputy, young Latham Raster, left his kneeling position at the side of the body and dusted his pudgy hands. "I don't like to say this, Sheriff, but this is no fatal accident. Someone strangled Mr. Whiffle."

"Impossible," said Tint impatiently. "No one ever gets strangled in Krowten Corners. There are no criminal types here. Wake George up and tell him to stop clowning around."

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"He's really dead," said Raster. "I guess someone tried to make it look like an accident by toppling these large cartons of toilet tissue down on the body, but the marks on his throat are very clear."

"Now why would someone strangle poor George Whiffle?" asked Tint.

"Perhaps they found his neck squeezably soft," said Raster. "What shall we do with the body?"

"Send it to kindly old Dr. Wilby. He'll take care of it. You and I will start an investigation."

By the end of the day they determined that practically no one in town had liked Mr. Whiffle and quite a few people couldn't stand him because he had been an obnoxious, pompous little man who ran around the supermarket all day demanding that customers stop handling the merchandise. The only reason people shopped in the supermarket at all was because it was the only place in town where they could buy groceries, aside from Cara's General Store where the selection was severely limited and the prices prohibitive.

One conclusion the two men did reach was that almost anyone could have done it, since it was common knowledge that Mr. Whiffle arrived at the store early every morning to count the cartons of toilet tissue he had on hand, and always entered through the rear door from the parking lot which at that hour of the morning was usually deserted.

"We have reached an impasse," announced Sheriff Tint. "Let's sign off for the day and resume our investigation tomorrow."

Tomorrow brought with it an excited young woman named Convergence O'Toole, who burst into Sheriff Tint's office with the news that Cara, the woman who owned the general store, was dead.

Tint and Raster found the body of the small old woman sprawled behind the wooden counter. Littering the floor were hundreds of cans of coffee.

"Good heavens," said Tint. "This is the work of a madman!"

"You can bet your Smith and Wesson on that," said Convergence indignantly. "He has mixed the perc grind cans with the drip grind. It will take me hours to straighten them out."

Raster examined the body. "Just like Mr. Whiffle," he said. "She's been strangled. Why should someone strangle poor old Cara?"

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"I don't know," said Tint. "Send the body to kindly old Dr. Wilby. We will investigate."

Their investigation showed that while Cara had not been as universally disliked as Mr. Whiffle, she had made absolutely the worst coffee in town and was constantly insisting that people who came into her store not only taste it but buy a can whether they wanted one or not.

"It could have been done by a tea drinker," said Raster thoughtfully.

"That is possible," said Tint. "Whatever happened to that big fellow who was around town for a time suggesting that everyone drink tea? He didn't look much like a tea drinker to me. Looked like he'd prefer something much stronger." Mimicking a man tossing off a quick one, he winked. "Know what I mean?"

"Haven't seen him in a long time," said Raster. "I don't think very many people paid any attention to him, so he left."

"Well," said Tint, "I guess we can forget him. But I have the feeling that the same person who strangled Mr. Whiffle also killed Cara."

"We're looking for a common denominator?"

"Since *I* am the sheriff, *I* am looking for a common denominator. Since you are the deputy, *you* are looking for fingerprints. Get the super-lightweight but sturdy portable kit and go over the store inch by inch. I'm going home."

That evening Tint had settled in his easy chair, ready for the latest episode of *Upstairs, Downstairs,* when his phone rang. Annoyed, he picked up the receiver.

"I have good news," announced Raster. "I have found an important clue."

"I can't talk now," said Tint. "The King is coming to dinner and Mrs. Bridges is preparing a marvelous feast. You should see it. Those gluttons won't be able to eat again for a week."

"*Upstairs, Downstairs* is more important than my clue?"

"Of course," said Tint. "After all, the King doesn't come to dinner every night, and your clue will still be there in the morning. Good night."

When Tint entered the office after having breakfasted at the diner, he found Raster waiting for him.

Raster pointed to the sheriff's shirtfront. "What happened to you?"

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Tint frowned. "Rosie, the waitress at the diner, wanted to demonstrate how thirstily absorbent her paper towels are so she slopped some coffee from my cup onto the counter. Unfortunately, a good deal of it landed on my shirt."

"She has a habit of doing that," said Raster. "It can become very irritating at times. However, Hester Gillicuddy claims she has a powerful new foaming-action detergent that leaves clothes whiter-than-white. I'm sure she'll be happy to wash your shirt for you."

"That won't be necessary," said Tint. "I'll let Mordecai Wallbanger wash it in that new top loader he's promoting at the appliance store, the one that starts out with Brahms's *Lullaby* played by musical jets of water as it is filling and ends with Arthur Fiedler conducting the Boston Pops playing *The Stars and Stripes Forever* during the spin-rinse cycle. Now let me see this clue of yours."

Raster proudly held up a pair of fingerprints he had lifted from a heavy coffee mug he had found in the corner of Cara's store behind some rusty garden spades.

"They are a little unusual," he said. "Obviously they represent a thumb and forefinger but the impressions show a ridge on each that simply has to be a callus. Now what sort of occupation could a man have that develops calluses on his thumb and forefinger?"

"I don't know," said Tint, "but I'm sure we'll find out eventually. If we are persistently dogged . . ." He frowned. "Or is it doggedly persistent? No matter. We must somehow bring this culprit to justice. We cannot tolerate violence in a typical American town like Krowten Corners."

Wilmot Krump, the mayor, pushed open the door of the sheriff's office, his bulk quivering with indignation.

"See here, Tint," he said. "I don't know what's going on in this town but you must put a stop to it. I have already lost two people who always contributed generously to my campaigns, and now, when I stopped in at Godwin's Variety Store, what do you think I found?"

"I couldn't guess," said Tint. "Old Smiley is a card."

"Well, somebody dealt him out," said Krump. "He's on the floor, strangled, as dead as yesterday's voter indignation, and I tell you, Tint, it's a real horror in there. The murderer took every tube of toothpaste in the place and mashed it flat. It looks as though Godwin is floating on a sea of fluoride."

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"Old Godwin would have liked that," said Tint. "He was a little flaked on the subject of cavities and checkups. Almost beat up the Billings kid last summer because he had a molar pulled." He sighed and motioned to Raster. "I suppose we might as well go over there."

In the variety store the situation was much as Mayor Krump had described it. Mr. Godwin indeed appeared to be floating on the coating of toothpaste that covered the floor.

"I don't understand why the murderer not only kills these people but insists on making a mess," said Tint.

"Perhaps he's angry at more than the people," said Raster.

Tint frowned at him. "That may well be a very penetrating observation. On the other hand, it may be a very stupid remark." He pointed. "What is that?"

Raster gingerly stepped through the coating of toothpaste and leaned over. "It's a footprint."

"Good," said Tint. "It is the best clue we have discovered so far. We must preserve it."

"How?" asked Raster. "The police manual doesn't cover making a cast of a footprint in toothpaste."

Tint scratched his chin. "Correct. We could cut out a section of the floor and take it with us."

"Of this floor? It's solid marble. Did you forget that this was once a drug store of the type that has almost faded from the American scene, complete with a marble soda fountain and a kindly old pharmacist who compounded prescriptions with cool and unerring skill instead of counting out pills from a large bottle into a small one?"

"Hmmm," said Tint. "You're right, but you're not old enough to remember things like that. What TV program was that on?"

"It was called *A Re-examination of Our Past and a Projection of the Next One Hundred Years of Medical Care in America,* complete with a panel of thirty-four distinguished physicians," said Raster.

"Sounds interesting," said Tint. "Wonder how I missed it."

"You had to be alert," said Raster. "They squeezed it in between the end of *Barnaby Jones* and the eleven o'clock news."

Tint grunted. "Well, let's get on with our investigation. Suppose you just measure it with your deputy's rustproof stainless-steel, self-winding tape you received as a premium for sending in three boxtops from that sugar-coated cereal."

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Raster measured. "It is exactly twelve inches long and four inches wide."

"Ah," said Tint. He thumbed through a small book. "My compendium of useful information for law-enforcement officers that Steve McGarrett sent to me from Hawaii says that it is a size 9½-D, which indicates a man of medium height."

"Not necessarily," said Raster thoughtfully. "Perhaps the shoe was worn by a short man with large feet." He frowned. "Or perhaps a large man with small feet. Or even a small man with small feet wearing shoes that are too large. It could even be a large man with large feet wearing shoes that are too small."

Tint glared at him. "Just send the body to kindly old Dr. Wilby. I will return to the office and try to think of someone to suspect. We now know we are looking for an average-sized man who has calluses on his thumb and forefinger."

An hour later Raster burst through the door of the office. "I have a suspect!" he announced excitedly. "The washing-machine repairman who has nothing to do but watch what goes on says that Artemis Kaber had a big argument with Mr. Godwin yesterday. It seems that Artemis wanted to buy a tube of non-fluoride toothpaste because he hates fluoride but Mr. Godwin threw him out of the store. Obviously Artemis has a motive."

"Nonsense," said Tint. "You know Artemis is a small man and he would hardly have calluses on his thumb and forefinger because he's the only manicurist in town and constantly soaking his fingers in that dishwashing liquid." The sheriff sighed as he stared out the window. "I'm afraid we are looking for someone more average than Artemis. I have come to the conclusion that the man we are looking for could be either a writer or an accountant, which would explain the calluses on his thumb and forefinger."

"Fantastic thinking!" exclaimed Raster. "It should be easy to check your theory since we have only two accountants and one writer in town."

"One accountant," said Tint. "Several men in white coats came and took away Hapgood Turbuckle the other day. It seems that Hapgood placed a perfectly good eight-hundred-dollar color television set, console model, superbly crafted of Australian wormwood with supermatrix, with a self-tuning twenty-five-inch picture tube out for the trash collectors. Naturally his wife thought this was a little odd, so she sent for the mind mechanics out at the Home to

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come and take him away for a tune-up."

"That leaves only Sylvanus Grubb," said Raster, disappointed. "He is quite short and very fat and is on a physical-fitness binge right now. He wears his red warmup suit and striped athletic shoes from morning until night and jogs wherever he goes, so I don't think he's our man."

"We still have the writer, Lochinvar Lovelace," said Tint.

Raster shifted uncomfortably. "I don't see how he can be guilty. Lochinvar is ninety years old, even though you wouldn't know it from those passionate love novels he turns out. I often wonder how he does it."

"Nothing wrong with Lochinvar's memory," said Tint. "But I guess you're right. A man who found it necessary to hire a beautiful young girl just to insert the paper into his typewriter is a little too old to run around strangling people. What we need is another clue."

At seven the next morning Tint was awakened by a pounding on his door. He opened it to find a stout handsome woman in her fifties patting her short blonde hair and smiling at him.

"My name is Euphoria Hackenstack," she said. "I live at the west end of town in what everyone calls a typical American suburb. In my typically American way I was out walking my pedigreed dog this morning when I found something lying on the lawn of one of our typically American homes. I asked myself who might be interested in what I had found and it occurred to me that you, as sheriff, might want to know first."

"What did you find?" asked Tint.

"A body," said Euphoria. "Someone has killed poor Mrs. Nelson."

"Who is Mrs. Nelson?"

"Well," said Euphoria, "I guess you would call Mrs. Nelson a typically American busybody. She was forever coming into people's homes and giving wives advice about coffee. I don't know how many broken marriages she has been responsible for."

"Was her advice that bad?"

"Terrible. She subscribed to the theory that a wife should brew excellent coffee for her husband, which is really ridiculous. The opposite is true. No smart wife gives her husband anything but terrible coffee because it gives him something to complain about. Husbands love to complain, so why should a woman stick her neck out? Let him complain about the coffee. It will take his

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mind off the money spent at the beauty parlor or something equally important."

"You sound like an expert," said Tint.

"I have thirty years of domestic bliss and tranquillity behind me," said Euphoria proudly. "I think that perhaps you had better come look at this body, Sheriff. While I may not have cared much for Mrs. Nelson, my social consciousness tells me she should not be left lying there indefinitely. Furthermore, since I assume you are interested in catching the person responsible, I am forced to point out you can't do so standing here gossiping with me."

Tint bowed. "I will call my deputy and then you may lead me to the body."

Mrs. Nelson had been an attractive woman of about 40. Surrounded by scattered cans of coffee, she lay on a patch of lawn alongside the back yard of a small corner home, several feet from assorted athletic paraphernalia designed to develop the muscles and motor skills of children and to keep them out of the house on nice days.

Raster, kneeling beside the body, looked up as Tint and Euphoria pushed their way through the typically American crowd.

"At least this one wasn't strangled," said Raster. "She has a terrible bruise on her forehead. It's possible she was struck by one of those cans of coffee."

He came close to Tint and whispered. "I think we have discovered our third clue. Look." He opened his palm. "This strand of red hair was clutched in her hand."

Tint pulled a small magnifying glass from his pocket and examined the hair closely. "Ah, yes," he said. "This is obviously a hair from the head of a woman born and raised in the Andante Valley of northern Italy."

"You mean our murderer is a redhaired immigrant?"

"Of course not," said Tint impatiently. "It means our murderer is an average-sized man with calluses on his thumb and forefinger who wears a toupee made of red hair."

Euphoria gasped and clutched her bosom.

"You seem upset," said Tint.

"You have described my beloved husband Alexander," she said.

"Where is he now?" asked Tint.

"Shopping," she said. "He retired a year ago and used to sit

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around the house watching television day and night but he found very few programs that pleased him. He changed channels so often he developed calluses on his thumb and forefinger. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I suggested he take over the shopping. He's been doing it for a week now."

"Quick," said Tint to Raster. "Take the body to kindly old Dr. Wilby and then meet me at the supermarket."

"I can't do that," said Raster. "Kindly old Dr. Wilby said if I bring him one more body he'll punch me in the nose. He says that when he agreed to act as coroner, he thought it was an honorary position. He didn't know he would be dealing with corpses. His specialties are exotic diseases and major personality traumas."

"Cart Mrs. Nelson over there and forget about it," said Tint. "The last time kindly old Dr. Wilby punched anyone in the nose, he was six years old and he's felt guilty about it ever since. Why do you think he became kindly old Dr. Wilby?"

At the supermarket Tint peered through the plate-glass window. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Many shoppers, most of them women, were already lined up at the checkout counters while others strolled the aisles pushing carts. Suddenly everyone in the store seemed to turn simultaneously and stare toward the rear.

Tint ran inside and pushed his way through the people toward the center of interest, almost knocking down a tall blonde woman who attempted to shove a buttered cracker into his mouth as he passed.

At the rear of the store he saw a small stout woman dressed in blue. She was screaming and using a roll of paper towels to fend off an elderly redhaired man of average height whose clawed fingers were aimed at her throat.

Tint wrapped a hand in the man's collar. "That's enough," he said.

The man subsided and the woman lowered the roll of paper towels.

"Now exactly what is going on?" asked Tint.

"He tried to kill me!" yelled the woman.

"Did you?" Tint asked the man.

"You can bet your coffee-stained shirt on that," said the man.

"Why?" asked Tint.

"Listen," said the man. "I came in here to do some shopping for my wife. Paper towels were on the list. I looked over the various

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brands and made my selection. The next thing I knew, this old biddy grabs me and starts singing in my ear that her brand of paper towels is heavier and that I'm making a big mistake. I told her to get lost, but she grabs my arm and pulls me to a scale, where she weighs her brand of towels and mine and babbles on and on that hers is heavier.

"Give me my towels and get away from me, I said, but she begins screaming at me to stop being so stupid. I told her I didn't want her towels, I didn't care about her towels, and I wouldn't take them as a gift, but she begins screaming louder and beating me on the head with her towels and shouting if I don't buy at least one roll I can't leave the store. So I tried to shut her up."

"Is that true?" Tint asked the woman.

"I was only doing my job," said the woman stiffly. "I'm a consumer-education expert and it's my responsibility to see that this man buys the best paper towel for his money. He is supposed to smile and thank me, but he's too stupid to know what's best for him. If he had bought the towels, I know he would have been grateful to me for the rest of his life, so all I did was apply a little typical American selling persuasion. Now I want him arrested. After all, I simply didn't want to see him waste his money on inferior, second-rate towels even if he did like the smiling camel printed on them in that gruesome magenta ink."

She made a face. "Sort of hokey, don't you agree, Sheriff? Now, mine have a different point of interest from all over the world printed on each oversized, extra-thirsty sheet. Sort of gives you a thrill during the dull workaday existence to realize you are mopping up the dog's muddy footprints with the Eiffel Tower, *n'est-ce pas*? Come, Sheriff, let me show you."

Tint tore himself from her grasp. "Later," he said. He beckoned to the man. "Come along."

As they walked toward the jail, Tint said, "I guess you're Alexander Hackenstack. Your wife told me where to find you."

"Euphoria is all right," said Hackenstack. "Makes terrible coffee and spends too much at the beauty parlor but a husband learns to live with those things. She also has a tendency to become a little too emotional at times. She cried terribly when the fad for hula hoops died."

"I suppose you strangled all those people," said Tint. "Now why did you do such an unsocial thing?"

"I was defending myself," said Hackenstack, "just as I was in

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the supermarket just now. Take that Whiffle jerk. I went into the store early that morning, the first customer. I was wandering around when I saw this sign on the toilet tissue that said don't squeeze, so naturally I squeezed. The next thing I knew there was Whiffle carrying on and screaming he would have me arrested. I was so embarrassed I tried to go out the rear door but he wouldn't leave me alone. He said I would have to wait for you and he tried to hold me. In the struggle the boxes of toilet tissue sort of tumbled down on us. To keep from being knocked off my feet, I grabbed the first thing handy. It wasn't my fault it happened to be his neck."

"How about Cara at the general store?"

"Same thing," said Hackenstack. "My wife wanted a super-easy, fast-cutting 1929-type Boy Scout can opener that only Cara stocked, so I stopped in. I never did get the can opener. First thing I knew, she was shoving a cup of coffee under my nose and demanding that I taste it. I told her I didn't want any but she kept pushing it at me and saying I had to buy a can."

Hackenstack shook his head. "Would you believe she actually pushed me to the floor and poured the coffee down my throat so I could see how good it was? In the struggle we knocked over all the coffee shelves and in an effort to protect the poor woman I grabbed her to pull her out of the way. Unfortunately, I grabbed her by the throat."

"That could happen," said Tint. "What about Mr. Godwin?"

Hackenstack sighed. "Would you believe I went in there just to buy a toothbrush? He asked me what kind of toothpaste I used. I told him. That was horrible stuff, he said. The next thing I knew he had me backed against the wall and was squeezing fluoride toothpaste into my mouth, yelling that I had to prevent cavities. I almost choked on the stuff. I tried to push him away but in the struggle we knocked down all the toothpaste and trampled it out of the tubes, which made the floor very slippery. I tried to support myself by hanging onto his neck and accidentally strangled him."

"That sounds reasonable," said Tint. "But there is still Mrs. Nelson."

"I had nothing to do with her death," said Hackenstack. "It's a little embarrassing but I must tell you that the woman had her cap set for me for a long time. Always whispering in my ear about how bad Euphoria's coffee was and if I would go with her she would show me how a *real* woman made coffee. Of course, I tried

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to avoid her but, busybody that she was, she knew I rose early to do a little jogging before breakfast, so she was waiting for me, carrying that paper bag filled with cans of coffee. Never could understand why the woman always had a paper bag filled with coffee cans with her wherever she went.

"She wanted me to run away with her to her coffee ranch in the mountains of Colombia and pick coffee beans with her cousin Juan Something-or-other. I'm afraid I was rather harsh. I told her to drop dead. She became angry and began throwing coffee cans at me. When I ducked, one hit that crazy bounce-back affair the Baylor kid uses to practise his fielding with the hope that someday he'll be a highly paid big-league shortstop. The can bounced straight back and bonked her on the forehead."

Tint held the cell door open for him. "Well, I guess I'll have to keep you here for a time. You can turn on the TV and relax."

"No, thanks," said Hackenstack. "It seems as though everywhere I look lately, I think I see one of those people in the commercials. Like the woman who collapses with shame because her husband has a ringy-dingy collar and the healthy-looking ones who drink iron. I could swear that just the other day I saw one of those detergent women floating down the street, yelling she had used only one cup in cold water and her clothes had come out squeaky-clean. And as I left a bar yesterday, a guy sprayed deodorant in my face to prove it wasn't an economical way to remain socially acceptable."

Tint patted him gently on the head. "You're just tired. Those people don't really exist, especially in Krowten Corners."

An hour later Tint finished explaining it all to Raster.

"So it really wasn't a crime wave," said Raster.

"More like a series of fatal misadventures brought on by their own actions," said Tint. "I told you there were no bad people in Krowten Corners."

The door of the office opened and an elderly, sweet-faced, motherly woman came in. She smiled at Tint. "I have just heard about your troubles of the past few days. You must be upset."

Tint shook his head. "Not me. I'm an experienced police officer. I don't get upset. However, my deputy is young and not accustomed to these things."

The woman advanced on Raster, smiling. "I'm sure you must have developed indigestion."

"No," said Raster. "I feel fine."

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The woman held out a roll of small mints. "Take one," she said. "It will make you feel better."

"I don't need any," said Raster.

"Of course you do," she said soothingly. "A Bummy in your tummy will get rid of all that nasty acid indigestion and make you feel ten feet tall again."

Raster backed away. "I don't have acid indigestion."

The woman became angry. "If Mother Bummy says you have acid indigestion, you have acid indigestion! Now take one of these!" She launched herself at Raster, knocking him to the floor, and astride his chest began to stuff Bummy after Bummy into his mouth.

Tint sighed, picked up the phone, and dialed.

When the man answered, Tint said, "Kindly old Dr. Wilby, I know you don't like to handle the bodies I have been sending over but I want you to know there will be at least one more. A motherly old woman who will be strangled."

He paused and studied the struggling figures.

"On the other hand," he said, "if Raster doesn't get moving, it just might be a young man with an overdose of Bummies."

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

It was only an ordinary family portrait—the color photograph of a father and mother, their daughter and son, standing in a back yard in front of a rose trellis. The picture was mounted in an ordinary, inexpensive frame, and there was nothing hidden behind the photo or in the frame. So why should someone pay Nick Velvet his minimum fee of $20,000 for an object that, at most, had only a sentimental value? And who was the man in the false red beard?

We confess to having more than a fond spot in our heart for Nick Velvet, the unique thief who steals only "the worthless, the outrageous, the mundane." No jewels or cash or negotiable bonds or objets d'art for Nick Velvet. And yet one day, we predict, Nick Velvet will be ranked as the great thief of American fiction, to sit beside France's Arsène Lupin and England's A. J. Raffles . . .

THE THEFT OF THE FAMILY PORTRAIT

by *EDWARD D. HOCH*

"I'm going back to college," Nick Velvet told Gloria one bright April morning over breakfast.

"Really, Nicky? I never knew you'd gone in the first place."

"Well, I didn't really. Except a couple of night courses when I got out of high school. But I think it's time I pursued my education."

"When do you start? In the fall?"

"No, tomorrow. I'm catching an afternoon plane for Ohio."

By now she was wise to him. "You're not going back to school

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at all! This is one of your mysterious government missions, isn't it?"

"Could be," he admitted with a smile, half wondering how much Gloria really knew about his money-making activities. There were times when he could have sworn she'd ceased to believe his elaborate lies about government service and secret missions. Perhaps she knew full well that he was nothing but a thief—if an uncommon one.

Nick Velvet stole the worthless, the outrageous, the mundane. He stole for a minimum fee of $20,000 that hadn't risen since the pre-inflation days twelve years ago when he'd first gone into business. His current assignment, which would take him to the campus of a small Ohio university, was not a great deal different from a score of others. He'd been hired to steal a framed 8 by 10 color photograph of a female student, her parents, and a younger brother. Kept in her room at the women's dormitory, the photograph and frame together had a value of perhaps $5. He did not ask why the nameless man with the red beard and the onyx ring was paying him $20,000 to steal it. The beard was obviously false and he only hoped the man's money was real.

That afternoon he kissed Gloria goodbye and flew off to Ohio, landing at the Cincinnati airport and renting a car for the remainder of the journey. Union Plains College was small and rural, with most of its students drawn from the immediate area. Beryl Chambers was one of the few girls in the senior class from as far away as New York City. It took Nick only a few hours on campus to have her pointed out to him. He was not surprised to see a leggy blonde girl who might have been last year's homecoming queen.

Red Beard had explained that Nick was being hired to steal the photo with a minimum of fuss. "We could hire some goon to go in through the window," he said. "But it's worth the money to us to get the picture without causing a disturbance."

So Nick didn't ask questions. He spent a day observing the campus from his car and the college bookstore and the library, and then he made his move. Like most colleges these days, Union Plains hired private security guards to patrol the campus. Their uniform was the standard police type, with similar-shaped badges, and Nick was able to rent a uniform in Cincinnati. He was back on campus the following day, mingling with the students who didn't give him a second look.

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He purposely chose the noon lunch period to enter the coed dorm where Beryl Chambers lived, figuring it was the time most likely to find her room empty. As he made his way across the ground-floor lounge he spotted a security guard at a distance and gave him a friendly wave. He was hoping the man's eyesight wasn't too good. Beryl's room was on the seventh floor, with a view of the athletic field. It took Nick only a moment to jimmy the lock on the door and enter.

Two beds, two desks, two closets. She obviously shared the room with another girl. He saw the framed photo at once, propped on the nearer desk, but before he could reach it the door to the hallway opened behind him.

"What's this?" a girl's voice asked. It was Beryl Chambers.

Nick turned on her gruffly. "Are you Miss Chambers?"

"Yes."

"Your door's been jimmied open. Looks like a robbery attempt, though I might have scared him away. Want to check to see if anything's missing?"

"My God! Aren't we even safe in the dorm?" She went quickly through her drawers and closet, relaxing a bit as she finally turned back to him. "Nothing seems to be missing."

"Maybe you should check your roommate's things."

She hesitated. "Well, all right. I'll just see if the drawers are messed up."

The door was still standing open and he glanced at the name plates. "Beryl? That your name?"

"That's it."

"Odd sort of name. Never knew a girl named Beryl."

"My father's a diamond merchant in New York. He planned to name all his daughters after gems—Beryl, Ruby, Pearl. But after me they just had a boy, and they named him George."

"Too bad."

She finished her search. "Well, nothing's missing."

"That's good. I'll have to turn in a report—"

"If you did scare him away, I'm grateful, Mr.—?"

"Nicholas."

"I haven't seen you around before."

"This is my first week."

She stared him down. "Odd that they'd hire someone new this late in the school year. We'll be graduating in a few weeks."

"Well, I was happy to get the job," Nick said.

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"I'm sure you were. Thanks again, Mr. Nicholas."

He touched the visor of his uniform cap and left the room. Some of the other girls were coming back now, laughing and chatting as they passed him. None of them looked at him, and none seemed to notice the oddly squared-off shape beneath his shirt. Nick was a firm believer in appearing casual at the right moment, and this was certainly the moment.

Once outside he headed for the off-campus lot where his car was parked. He opened the trunk, slipped the framed photograph of the Chambers family from beneath his shirt, and hid it in the well behind the spare tire. Given a little more time, without the charming interruption of Miss Chambers, he might have taken the photo alone and left the frame—but there was a better chance of its absence going unnoticed this way. It might be days before she realized it was missing, and by that time Nick would have the picture in Red Beard's hands.

He took the photo out again and studied it. Father and mother, sister and brother, standing in the back yard in front of a rose trellis and squinting at the sun. It was the sort of picture an aunt with a new camera might have taken.

There was little doubt that Beryl had her mother's good looks. Both were handsome women with broad smiles and an unnerving manner of staring at the camera as if it were a close personal friend. Nick remembered the way Beryl had stared at him in her room. Mr. Chambers, in contrast, was a balding bankerish figure, The squinting was most pronounced in his eyes and in his son's—a lad of twelve or so who seemed bored by the whole thing.

There was certainly nothing about the photograph to make it worth $20,000, and this led Nick to slip it out of its frame, checking the back for some piece of paper like a rare stamp or a missing will. But there was nothing.

Only the picture of four average—somewhat better-looking than average—people in the back yard of their home.

Nick shook his head thoughtfully as he stored the picture back in its hiding place behind the tire.

He opened the car door and eased behind the wheel. Before he could close the door, the one on the passenger side opened and Beryl Chambers slid her slender body onto the seat next to him.

"I didn't want you to leave without me," she said, "since you admired my picture so much."

"I was just going off duty," Nick managed to tell her, trying to

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keep his face passive. "Did you want to report something else about the robbery?"

"Look here, Mr. Nicholas or whatever your name is, that picture of my family was on the desk when I walked into the room, and it was gone when you walked out of the room. I don't need a detective to know you stole it!"

"Well, yes, I took it. But I'd hardly call it stealing. If you followed me all the way out here for that, you're mistaken. I took it because I believe it might have some bearing on your attempted robbery."

"I'll bet." She studied him with her all-seeing eyes, tapping the knee of her jeans with a long pink fingernail that surprised Nick. He hadn't thought that college girls wore nail polish any more. "Just who are you, Mr. Nicholas?"

"Who do you want me to be?"

"You stole my picture. Does that mean you might return and attack me in my bed?"

"If you thought that for a second you wouldn't be here talking about it."

"I suppose not," she agreed. "You had plenty of opportunity for that up in my room."

"So you'd better get out of my car while we're both agreed."

She shook her head. "I'm going with you." She was smiling the smile of the photograph, and her deep blue eyes might have been squinting at the sun.

"Foolish girl. You don't even know my name. And I'm old enough to be your father."

"I like older men. And you can tell me your name any time."

He started the car. No sense attracting attention by lingering there too long. "It's Nick."

"Nick what?"

"Nick is all you need to know."

"Carlos sent you, didn't he?"

"Did he? Who is Carlos?"

"A friend of mine. At least, I think he's a friend of mine."

"Never met the chap."

"Then why did you steal our family picture?"

Nick shrugged. "Why would Carlos want to steal it?"

"I suppose because he's in love with me."

"Oh?"

"I think."

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"Doesn't he have a picture of you?"

"Sure, he's always taking them."

"Then he'd hardly need one more."

"No, I suppose not."

As he drove, Nick was pondering how to get rid of his unexpected passenger. It wasn't often that the victim tagged along with the loot, and he didn't know quite what to do, short of pushing her bodily from the car. But even if he did that, she'd probably call the police. Red Beard hadn't wanted any fuss. For the time being, at least, it was best to keep her with him.

He was aware that she was studying his profile, and after a moment she asked, "Would you help me, Nick?"

"Help you? With what?"

"A problem I've got. You look like a man I could trust."

"You've known me less than an hour, and you think I'm a thief besides."

"I'm good at judging people. Everyone except Carlos, that is."

"So Carlos is your problem."

"Yes."

Nick turned the car onto the highway leading back to Cincinnati. "Suppose you tell me about him."

"Well, his name is Carlos Swann, and I guess he's about your age."

"Old enough to be your father," Nick repeated.

"Well, yes. He runs an after-hours club down in Louisville."

"I'll be—"

"It's only an hour and forty-five minutes' drive from here, and the kids are always going down there on weekends."

"I'll bet!"

"Anyway, I got friendly with him and we had a few dates."

"Is he married?"

"He's been divorced for years. He's a really nice guy."

"But a criminal."

"I don't consider selling booze after hours to be a crime."

"Or selling it to minors? You have to be twenty-one in Kentucky. *And* here in Ohio."

"I'm twenty-one and so are most of my friends. He's very careful about that. My problem is something else."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, he wants to marry me. I don't dare mention it to Daddy, and I hope you won't, either."

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"Why should I—" Nick began and then stopped. There'd been something odd about this whole thing ever since she hopped into the car with him. Did she think he was somehow connected with her father? Did that explain her fearless eagerness to come with him and blurt out the secrets of her personal life?

"My problem, Mr. Nicholas, is this—does Carlos love me for myself or for Daddy's money?"

"An age-old problem, it seems to me. I suspect the Pharaoh's daughters asked themselves that back in ancient Egypt."

"Could you come with me and meet him?"

"When—now?"

"Certainly now! I told you it's a short drive down to Louisville."

Well, Nick decided, why not? He was never one to refuse an afternoon with a pretty girl.

Somewhere during the next hour, as they headed south on route 71, the thought occurred to Nick that Carlos Swann, when he met him, could well prove to be his mysterious bearded employer. There was no real reason to think so, but Nick's hunches had often paid off in the past.

This time his hunch was wrong.

Even allowing for the false beard, Carlos Swann looked nothing like the man who had hired him. Swann was of medium build, just a bit taller than Beryl, and was the sort who wore tight pants and silk shirts. His pencil-thin mustache and slicked-down black hair gave him the look of someone left over from a 1930s movie. But it was probably in keeping with his image, Nick decided, glancing around at the plush after-hours club that seemed only like an empty stage setting in the daytime.

"This is Nick," Beryl announced, making the introductions. "He's a new friend. I just met him today."

Carlos Swann smiled and extended his hand. "And Beryl is showing you the sights of Louisville? We are one, no doubt, but you must return after dark to get the full effect."

"I can use my imagination," Nick said. He couldn't believe that Beryl could be serious about such a person.

Carlos led him into his office and poured drinks from a cut-glass decanter. "Where are the pictures, Carlos?" Beryl asked at once. "I want to show Nick the pictures of us."

"I'm sure he wouldn't be interested."

"But I would," Nick insisted.

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Carlos pulled open a drawer and handed Beryl some packets of color snapshots. Most of them were of Beryl and Carlos together—at a picnic, in a parking lot outside the building, and even on the campus of Union Plains College. A few were of Beryl alone. They were pictures of a young couple in love, except that Carlos Swann was forty-odd years old and looked it.

"Very nice," Nick commented, glancing through the photos a second time. He palmed two of the best. Swann might be known back east.

"She is so lovely! Next week I go to New York to meet her father."

Beryl hesitated. "It may be too soon for that, Carlos."

"But we agreed!"

"I know. Let me think about it."

Carlos turned his attention back to Nick. "Are you from this area?" he asked.

"No, I live in New York. Or near there, anyway."

"What brings you out here?"

"Travel is broadening, they say."

Beryl suggested they take Carlos away from his work and go off somewhere to eat. "You'll enjoy eating out for a change," she insisted, and he agreed without a struggle. She led them to a little Italian restaurant nearby, and it was obvious that the two of them had been there before. "Carlos wants me to marry him," she explained to Nick over drinks. "That's why we're going to New York next week—*if* we go. He wants to ask my father's permission in the best Victorian manner."

"That's nice," Nick answered vaguely. When the food arrived he dug into it, thinking only of making his escape back to New York. Whatever Beryl expected of him, he was unable to give it.

"Did you like him?" she asked as they drove back to the college later that evening.

"What am I supposed to say? You're old enough to make your own judgment of a man like that."

"I knew it—you didn't like him!"

Nick sighed and kept his eyes on the road. "Neither do you, really. You're allowing this big romance to happen just to prove something about being grown up. I guess you figure at the proper moment your father will arrive to buy off Carlos and rescue you."

"Won't he?" She was turned in her seat, looking at Nick. "Isn't that what he sent you for?"

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He was about to deny it, but instead he asked. "How do you know he sent me?"

"Oh, because of the picture, of course! I wasn't supposed to take it with me because of the insurance thing. I should have known he'd send someone to get it back!"

"Don't you think he's right?" Nick asked carefully.

"Who ever heard of an insurance policy that says you can't have your picture taken?"

Suddenly Nick remembered what she'd said about her father's business—he was a New York diamond merchant. Nick even remembered the Fifth Avenue store he'd passed a hundred times—Barton Chambers Fine Jewelry. Red Beard's motive was clear at last. "That's not uncommon in the diamond industry," he said. "Insurance companies are so afraid of having someone like your father mugged or kidnaped that the policies contain a special clause forbidding photographs in the press or on television. The ban can't extend to family portraits, but your father rightly feels that picture shouldn't be floating around out here."

"I don't care! I still think it's crazy."

"When are you and Carlos coming to New York? If you come."

"I can cut a few classes next week and catch a plane Monday."

"Should I tell your father?"

She smiled at him then. "No—I'll phone him on Sunday."

Nick dropped her at the dorm and drove the rented car back to the Cincinnati airport. The trip had already taken longer than expected and he was anxious to get home with the framed portrait now carefully stowed in his attaché case.

He'd left Beryl convinced that he was a trusted employee of her father's. Of course she would learn the truth next week—and Mr. Chambers might even tumble to the truth about the plot against him. For certainly there was a plot. Red Beard and hig gang were paying $20,000 for the picture so Chambers could be identified and no doubt kidnaped. A ransom in diamonds would make twenty grand seem like peanuts.

On the plane Nick pulled the attaché case from beneath his seat and opened it. Yes, there was the picture in its frame—a typical American family in the backyard.

Damn! Was he growing mellow with middle age? So Chambers was going to be snatched, maybe even killed before it was over. Was that any business of his?

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He remembered Beryl and thought about how the crime would affect her. Then he thought about the slippery Carlos Swann, no doubt already planning his future with the Chambers family money. Did he deserve that, while Beryl's father faced kidnaping and possible death?

Nick reached into his inner pocket and removed the two snapshots of Swann that he'd palmed while looking through the pictures. In one of them Swann's head was almost exactly the same size as the head of Beryl's father in the family portrait.

And that gave Nick an idea.

Gloria met him at the airport, full of talk about her activities of the past few days. When he reached home, he went into his den and set to work with a razor and some rubber cement. By the time he'd finished, Carlos Swann's head had been adroitly transferred to the color print in the gold frame. Nick sat back and admired his handiwork. Even the shadows seemed to match, and the glass covering over the picture would protect it from too careful an examination.

Carlos Swann had joined the Chambers family, though not in the way he had planned.

When he met Red Beard again, at the back of a deserted shopping-center parking lot the following night, the man accepted the large manila envelope and glanced inside. "That's it," he said, closing the clasp without removing the portrait. "Have any trouble?"

Nick shrugged. "Routine."

"Good. Here's the rest of your money. A pleasure doing business with you."

"Any time," Nick said, and went back to his own car.

He knew Beryl and Carlos would be arriving the following day, and it seemed likely they would arrange to meet Mr. Chambers at his Fifth Avenue store. Nick realized he should stay away. The money was in his pocket and the work was done. But he felt drawn to the place, to see if his supposition about the picture's value was true. Obviously Red Beard's gang planned to strike in the store itself, or just outside. Otherwise they'd have been more interested in the location of the Chambers home than in the physical appearance of Chambers himself.

Beryl had mentioned a noon flight, and a check of the schedules indicated that she should reach the store shortly before three if

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she came directly from the airport. Nick went up to Fifth and 53rd, stationed himself in front of the Doubleday window, and waited.

He'd guessed correctly, though traffic had apparently delayed them a bit. It was 3:10 when a taxi pulled up in front of Barton Chambers Fine Jewelry. Beryl and Carlos emerged, and the driver unloaded two small suitcases from the trunk. Fifth Avenue was crowded, and Nick had no way of knowing if Red Beard was also watching the scene. What would he be thinking if he saw it—that a dutiful father had gone to the airport to meet his daughter?

Nick strolled up and down the block for the next hour or so, waiting for them to emerge. When they finally did, Barton Chambers was in the lead, looking exactly as he had in the family portrait. Beryl was at his side and Carlos Swann brought up the rear. They turned down 54th Street and walked toward a nearby parking garage.

Then suddenly Nick saw the figures converging on them. There was a struggle of some sort in progress near the corner. A siren cut the afternoon air and an ambulance appeared on Fifth Avenue almost by magic. As Nick watched from across the street three men bundled their captive into the ambulance and it took off down the avenue, with red lights and siren clearing the way.

Nick ran across the street to where Beryl was being helped up off the sidewalk. She saw his familiar face and ran to him. "Nick, Nick—where were you? They kidnaped him!"

"Who? Carlos?"

"No! My father!"

Nick had tried to tamper with fate, and somehow fate had ignored him. The kidnaping of Barton Chambers and the subsequent million-dollar ransom demand were big news the following morning. It was obvious the crime had been planned to the last detail. The ambulance had got as far as Madison Square before it turned off its siren and lights and disappeared into a side street. The police found it abandoned on East 26th Street within ten minutes, but by that time its passengers had transferred to a vaguely described van and been swallowed up by midtown traffic.

Nick had not waited with Carlos and Beryl to be questioned by the police. Sooner or later Beryl would discover that he was not in the employ of her father, and the police would make him a prime

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suspect. He went home and followed developments on television, wondering how it would all turn out.

He didn't have too long to wonder. Beryl and her mother arranged for payment of the ransom money and Barton Chambers was released unharmed, just 42 hours after his kidnaping.

The police admitted they were without clues.

Two days later, as Nick was crossing the street near his home, he was almost run down by a car that darted from a side street and bore down on him at full speed.

He'd had only the briefest glimpse of the driver, but he knew who it was. Red Beard.

So now they wanted to kill him.

Why?

Red Beard was the only member of the gang Nick had met, and with that disguise accurate identification would be difficult. They had nothing to fear from him.

Or was it because of his fooling with the heads in the picture? Did they resent being done out of Nick's fee of twenty grand?

He thought about it, and waited for the next attempt on his life.

This time it took a week.

He'd almost forgotten about the whole thing. Almost, but not quite. When he received a telephoned summons to meet a stranger about a new assignment, he took a small automatic pistol with him, just in case.

The man waiting for him at a service area on the New York State Thruway was clean-shaven and balding. He might have been fooled if he hadn't noticed the onyx ring he'd last seen on Red Beard's hand.

"I have a gun here," Nick said, "and it's pointed at your stomach."

The man backed against the fender of his car. "What?"

Nick relieved him of a .38 revolver and ordered him into the car. "You're handsomer with the beard," he said. "You should wear it all the time."

"What sort of game are you playing, Velvet?"

"Just trying to stay alive, that's all. Where's your boss?"

"Who?"

"The brains behind the kidnaping. Where is he?"

"I don't know anything about—"

"Cut it out, mister. I know the whole story. What I didn't know before I've guessed by now. Where is he?"

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"I told you—"

"Look, you tried to kill me last week and I think you were going to have another try today. And I know why."

That was when Red Beard lunged at him. Nick hit him with the gun across the side of the head and left him sprawled on the front seat.

From a pay phone he called the police and told them they could find one of Chambers' kidnapers at the Thruway service area. He gave them the license number of the car. He figured that was enough. Proving it would be up to them.

The following day he flew back to Cincinnati, for Beryl Chambers' graduation.

It was only the second week in May, but the colleges seemed to hold their graduations earlier each year. Nick found himself strolling across the sunlit campus with Barton Chambers and his wife and daughter as if he was really a member of the family. Carlos Swann was there too, of course, looking like an uncle but acting like a lover.

"Good to meet you after everything I've heard," Barton Chambers said, shaking hands with Nick. "I understand you gave my daughter some very sound advice." He was a pleasant man with a fatherly appearance.

"I tried to help out," Nick admitted.

"But I don't understand exactly who you are. Beryl was under the impression you were an employee of mine, but of course we've never met before today."

Nick looked over at Beryl, standing in her cap and gown next to Carlos Swann. "I was passing through, and she asked my advice. Tell me, sir, is there somewhere we could talk privately?"

Barton Chambers hesitated only a moment. "We could stroll off in that direction and join the others later."

"An excellent idea."

As they walked, Chambers glanced back to be certain Beryl and Carlos and Mrs. Chambers were out of earshot. "It's about my kidnaping, isn't it? Beryl said you appeared from nowhere on the street just after it happened."

"That's right, I did. I had reason to believe some such crime was in the works."

"I'm sorry you weren't there in time to prevent it."

Nick hesitated, then decided to plunge on. "Frankly, I was

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ready to forget about it after the ransom was paid and you were returned safely. After all, it was only money. But then a couple of attempts were made on my life—"

"Your life?"

"—and I decided I should come out here and tell you what I know. I decided to tell you who planned your kidnaping."

Barton Chambers took a deep breath. "I think I know that. It was Carlos Swann, wasn't it?"

"That was the conclusion I reached too," Nick said. "I imagine Beryl told you I took the picture from her room in the dorm. But I changed it, substituting Swann's head for yours before I delivered it to your kidnapers."

"Why did you do that?"

Nick shrugged. "As a gesture to your daughter, I suppose. She's a fine young lady."

"I could have you arrested for what you're telling me, Mr.—er—Nick. You're admitting you were part of it."

"Just hear me out, please."

"All right."

"I assumed the kidnapers would grab Carlos instead of you, and that would warn you what was afoot. But they didn't. They took you anyway. I had to ask myself why—and the answer I came up with seemed the only one possible. They knew which of the two men was Barton Chambers because they knew who Carlos was. Carlos was the brains behind them, luring you out of the store and setting you up for the kidnaping."

"And that crook wants to marry my daughter!"

Nick hurried on. "I said it *seemed* like the only possible explanation. But when I really gave it some thought it didn't hold water. Carlos didn't need to hire me to steal the picture, because he'd be there himself to finger you. Carlos had no reason for wanting me dead afterward. And Carlos, of all people, had no reason to plot your kidnaping when he was on the verge, he thought, of marrying into the family fortune."

"You're telling me it wasn't Carlos?"

"Yes, and that complicates the whole thing. Because if Carlos wasn't involved, how did they know which man was you? There was certainly no guesswork involved in an operation like that. Sure, one of the kidnapers might have been a former customer or employee who knew you by sight, but if that was the case why did they need me to steal your picture? They needed the picture, and

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yet when I changed it, substituting Carlos for you, it didn't fool them. Is there an answer to all this? Just one, I think. And it explains why they tried to kill me afterwards too."

"You've really given this some thought."

"My life depended on it. You see, I delivered the fake family portrait to the man with the red beard, but I don't believe he ever really looked at it. No one did, till later. That's why Carlos wasn't grabbed instead of you. They knew it was you all along."

"But you just said—"

"They knew it was you, but that couldn't be admitted. Because of the insurance policy it had to seem like a legitimate, well-plotted kidnaping—in broad daylight on Fifth Avenue. Which of course it wasn't. You arranged the whole thing to collect the insurance, Mr. Chambers."

"That's ridiculous!" He'd come to a stop on the path and turned to face Nick. "Did you come out here to spout this nonsense?"

"I don't think it's nonsense. Like a great many wealthy men, especially in the diamond business, you carry insurance against kidnaping. It must have seemed a likely source of big money when you ran into some kind of financial bind, so you hired Red Beard and his friends to stage a spectacular but phony kidnaping. The insurance company forbids your picture to appear in the papers or on television, but they can hardly outlaw family portraits. When Beryl went off to college with one this year, the whole plot came to you. I would be hired to steal the picture from her room, and of course she'd testify to its theft later. This would serve two purposes—to make the kidnaping seem authentic, and just maybe to implicate this fellow Swann that your daughter was running around with out here."

"Is that all?" Barton Chambers asked dryly.

"No, there's more. The crowning bit of evidence, so to speak. I was hired to steal that picture, but how did Red Beard know it even existed—and if it did exist that it was in your daughter's dorm in Ohio? Anyone who could have seen it and passed the word—her roommate or friends—could have stolen it too, without bothering to hire me. Even Swann, if she told him about it, could have found some excuse to see it and copy it.

"No, only you could have told Red Beard about the picture. Only you would have wanted me hired to bolster the idea of a carefully planned kidnaping. Only you would have neglected to study the picture till later because you thought you knew exactly

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what it looked like. And only you, Mr. Chambers, finally realizing that I'd pasted Swann's head on top of yours, would have ordered me killed before I put two and two together."

"You're a long-winded chap for a thief," Chambers remarked. "All right, how much do you want?"

"Nothing. I feel I cheated you out of twenty thousand already, since I doctored the picture before making delivery."

"Nothing! Are you going to tell the police this wild story of yours?"

"No." They'd been walking in a wide circle and they were almost back to the others now. "But Red Beard is in the hands of the police and I wouldn't be too surprised if he spilled the whole thing to them, to save his own skin."

"But—but if you don't want money and you're not going to tell the police, why in hell did you come all the way out here today?"

"Oh," Nick said, smiling at Beryl as he saw her glance in his direction. "I just wanted you to know that I knew the truth. That's all."

"Q"

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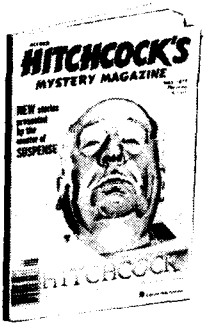

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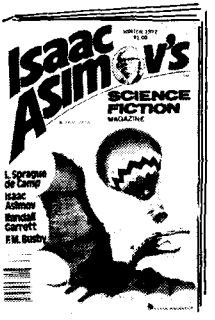

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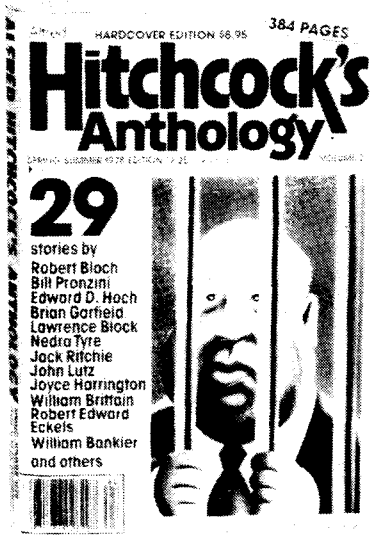

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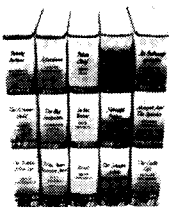

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